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PLANET series

14

A SOUND OF THUNDER

by **RAY BRADBURY**

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New Zealand Edition

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Published in England by Publisher & Co. Publishers Ltd., and distributed in North America under contract to G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York City, New York, by arrangement with the publishers. Published monthly by Love Romance Publishing Co., Ltd., 2001 Broadway, New York, New York. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1955, by Love Romance Publishing Co., Ltd. Reprinted as copyrighted, under the title of *Planet Stories*, by the Post Office at Montreal, Canada. Advertisement rates at New York N.Y., under the title of *Planet Stories*, 1955, are hereby granted. Names of all contributors and the names and addresses of the authors are welcome. If the names of any contributors are omitted, it is not intended to offend. Printed in England by G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, New York, New York.

A SOUND OF THUNDER

By RAY BRADBURY



Back sixty million years hurtled the time machine. Suns fled, and ten million moons fled after them . . . and Eckels—the avid hunter—learned his paradise was the land he'd just departed.

THE sign on the wall seemed to quaver under a film of sliding warm water. Eckels felt his eyelids blink over his face, and the sign burred in this momentary darkness:

TIME SAFARI, INC.
SAFARIS TO ANY YEAR IN THE PAST.
YOU NAME THE ANIMAL.
WE TAKE YOU THERE.
YOU SHOOT IT.

A warm phlegm gathered in Eckels' throat; he swallowed and pushed it down.

The muscles around his mouth formed a smile as he put his hand slowly out upon the air, and in that hand waved a check for ten thousand dollars to the man behind the desk.

"Does this safari guarantee I come back alive?"

"We guarantee nothing," said the official, "except the dinosaurs." He turned. "This is Mr. Travis, your Safari Guide in the Past. He'll tell you what and where to shoot. If he says no shooting, no shooting. If you



disobey instructions, there's a stiff penalty of another ten thousand dollars, plus possible government action, on your return."

Eckels glanced across the vast office at a mass and tangle, a smaking and humming of wires and steel boxes, at an aura that flickered now orange, now silver, now blue. There was a sound like a gigantic bonfire burning all of Time, all the years and all the parchment calendars, all the boxes piled high and set aflame.

A touch of the hand and this burning would, on the instant, beautifully reverse itself. Eckels remembered the wooding in the advertisements to the letter. Out of chaos and ashes, out of dust and coals, like golden salamanders, the old years, the green years, might leap; rooks sweeten the air, white hair turn Irish-black, wrinkles vanish; all, everything fly back to seed, flee death, rush down to their beginnings, suns rise in western skies and set in glorious easts, moons eat themselves opposite to the custom, all and everything capping one in another like Chinese boxes, rabbits into hats, all and everything returning to the fresh death, the seed death, the green death, to the time before the beginning. A touch of a hand might do it, the merest touch of a hand.

"Hell and damn," Eckels breathed, the light of the Machine on his thin face. "A real Time Machine." He shook his head. "Makes you think. If the election had gone badly yesterday, I might be here now running away from the results. Thank God Keith won. He'll make a fine President of the United States."

"Yes," said the man behind the desk. "We're lucky. If Deutscher had gotten in, we'd have the worst kind of dictatorship. There's an anti-everything man for you, a militarist, anti-Christ, anti-human, anti-intellectual. People called us up, you know, joking but not joking. Said if Deutscher became President they wanted to go live in 1492. Of course it's not our business to conduct Escapes, but to form Safaris. Anyway, Keith's President now. All you got to worry about is—"

"Shooting my dinosaur," Eckels finished it for him.

"A *Tyrannosaurus rex*. The Thunder Lizard, the damndest monster in history.

Sign this release. Anything happens to you, we're not responsible. Those dinosaurs are hungry."

Eckels flushed angrily. "Trying to scare me!"

"Frankly, yes. We don't want anyone going who'll panic at the first shot. Six Safari leaders were killed last year, and a dozen hunters. We've had to give you the damndest thrill a real hunter ever asked for. Traveling you back sixty million years to bag the biggest damned game in all Time. Your personal check's still there. Tear it up."

Mr. Eckels looked at the check for a long time. His fingers twitched.

"Good luck," said the man behind the desk. "Mr. Travis, he's all yours."

They moved silently across the room, taking their guns with them, toward the Machine, toward the silver metal and the roaring light.

FIRST a day and then a night and then a day and then a night, then it was day-night-day-night-day. A week, a month, a year, a decade! A.D. 2033, A.D. 2019, 1999! 1937! Gosh! The Machine roared.

They put on their oxygen helmets and tested the intercoms.

Eckels swayed on the padded seat, his face pale, his jaw stiff. He felt the trembling in his arms and he looked down and found his hands tight on the new rifle. There were four other men in the Machine. Travis, the Safari Leader, his assistant, Leeperman, and two other hunters, Billings and Kramer. They sat looking at each other, and the years blazed around them.

"Can these guns get a dinosaur cold?" Eckels felt his mouth saying.

"If you hit them right," said Travis on the helmet radio. "Some dinosaurs have two brains, one in the head, another far down the spinal column. We stay away from those. That's stretching luck. Put your first two shots into the eyes, if you can, blind them, and go back into the brain."

The Machine howled. Time was a film run backward. Suns fled and ten million moons fled after them. "Good God," said Eckels. "Every hunter that ever lived would envy us today. This makes Africa seem like Illinois."

The Machine slowed, its scream fell to a murmur. The Machine stopped.

The gun stopped in the sky.

The fog that had enveloped the Machine blew away and they were in an old time, a very old time indeed, three hunters and two Safari Hounds with their blue metal guns across their knees.

"Christ isn't born yet," said Travis. "Moses has not gone to the mountain to talk with God. The Pyramids are still in the earth, waiting to be cut out and put up. Remember that, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler—none of them exists."

The men nodded.

"That"—Mr. Travis pointed—"is the jungle of sixty million two thousand and fifty-five years before President Keith."

He indicated a metal path that struck off into green wilderness, over steaming swamp, among giant ferns and palms.

"And that," he said, "is the Path, laid by Time Safari for your use. It floats six inches above the earth. Don't touch as much as one grass blade, flower, or tree. It's an anti-gravity metal. Its purpose is to keep you from touching this world of the past in any way. Stay on the Path. Don't go off it. I repeat. *Don't go off.* For any reason! If you fall off, there's a penalty. And don't shoot any animal we don't shoot."

"Why?" asked Belski.

They sat in the ancient wilderness. Far birds' cries blew on a wind, and the smell of tar and an old salt sea, moist grasses, and flowers the color of blood.

"We don't want to change the Future. We don't belong here in the Past. The government doesn't like us here. We have to pay big graft to keep our franchise. A Time Machine is damn finicky business. Not knowing it, we might kill an important animal, a small bird, a roach, a flower even, thus destroying an important link in a growing species."

"That's not clear," said Belski.

"All right," Travis continued, "say we accidentally kill one mouse here. That means all the future families of this one particular mouse are destroyed, right?"

"Right."

"And all the families of the families of the families of that one mouse! With a stamp of your foot, you annihilate that one,

then a dozen, then a thousand, a million, a billion possible mice!"

"So they're dead," said Belski. "So what?"

"So what?" Travis sneezed quietly. "Well, what about the forces that'll need those mice to survive? For want of ten mice, a fox dies. For want of ten foxes, a lion starves. For want of a lion, all manner of insects, vultures, infinite billions of life-forms are thrown into chaos and destruction. Eventually it all boils down to this: fifty-nine million years later, a cave man, one of a dozen on the *entire world*, goes hunting wild bear or saber-tooth tiger for food.

"But you, friend, have stepped on all the tigers in that region. By stepping on one single mouse. So the cave man starves. And the cave man, please note, is not just any expendable man, no! He is an *entire future nation*. From his loins would have sprung ten sons. From *their* loins one hundred sons, and thus onward to a civilization. Destroy this one man, and you destroy a race, a people, an entire history of life. It is comparable to slaying some of Adam's grandchildren. The stamp of your foot, on one mouse, could start an earthquake, the effects of which could shake our earth and destined down through Time, to their very foundations.

"With the death of that one cave man, a billion others yet unborn are throttled in the womb. Perhaps Rome never rises on its seven hills. Perhaps Europe is forever a dark forest, and only Asia waves healthy and booming. Step on a mouse and you crush the Pyramids. Step on a mouse and you leave your print, like a Grand Canyon, across Eternity. Queen Elizabeth might never be born, Washington might not cross the Delaware, there might never be a United States at all. So be careful. Stay on the Path. *Never step off!*"

"I see," said Belski. "Then it wouldn't pay for us even to touch the *grass!*"

"CORRECT. Crushing certain plants could add up infinitesimally. A little cress here would multiply in sixty million years, all out of proportion. Of course maybe our theory is wrong. Maybe Time *can't* be changed by us. Or maybe it can be

changed only in little subtle ways. A dead mouse here makes an insect imbalance there, a population disproportion later, a bad harvest further on, a depression, mass starvation, and, finally, a change in social temperament in far-flung countries. Something much more subtle, like that. Perhaps only a soft breath, a whisper, a hair, pollen on the air, such a slight, slight change that unless you looked close you wouldn't see it. Who knows? Who really can say he knows? We don't know. We're guessing. But until we do know for certain whether our messing around in Time can make a big roar or a little rattle in history, we're being damned careful.

"This Machine, this Path, your clothing and bodies, were sterilized, as you know, before the journey. We wear these oxygen helmets so we can't introduce our bacteria into an ancient atmosphere."

"How do we know which animals to shoot?"

"They're marked with red paint," said Travis. "Today, before our journey, we sent Lesperance here back with the Machine. He came to this particular era and followed certain animals."

"Studying them?"

"Right," said Lesperance. "I track them through their entire existence, noting which of them lives longest. Very few. How many times they mate. Not often. Life's short. When I find one that's going to die when a tree falls on him, or one that drowns in a tar pit, I note the exact hour, minute, and second. I shoot a paint bomb. It leaves a red patch on his hide. We can't miss it. Then I coordinate our arrival in the Past so that we meet the Monster not more than two minutes before he would have died anyway. This way, we kill only animals with no future, that are never going to mate again. You see how careful we are?"

"But if you came back this morning in Time," said Eckels eagerly, "you must've bumped into us, our Safari! How did it turn out? Was it successful? Did all of us get through—alive?"

Travis and Lesperance gave each other a look.

"That'd be a paradox," said the latter.

"Time doesn't permit that sort of mess—a man meeting himself. When such occasions

threaten, Time steps aside. Like an airplane hitting an air pocket. You felt the Machine jump just before we stopped? That was us passing ourselves on the way back to the Future. We saw nothing. There's no way of telling if this expedition was a success, if we got our monster, or whether all of us—meaning you, Mr. Eckels—got out alive."

Eckels smiled palely.

"Cue that," said Travis sharply. "Everyone on his feet!"

They were ready to leave the Machine.

The jungle was high and the jungle was broad and the jungle was the entire world forever and forever. Sounds like music and sounds like flying tents filled the sky, and those were pterodactyls soaring with cavernous gray wings, gigantic bats out of a delirium and a night fever. Eckels, balanced on the narrow Path, aimed his rifle playfully.

"Stop that!" said Travis. "Don't even aim for fun, damn it! If your gun should go off—"

Eckels flushed. "Where's our *Tyrannosaurus*?"

Lesperance checked his wrist watch. "Up ahead. We'll meet his trail in sixty seconds. Look for the red point, for Christ's sake. Don't shoot till we give the word. Stay on the Path. *Stay on the Path!*"

They moved forward in the wind of morning.

"Strange," murmured Eckels. "Up ahead, sixty million years, Election Day over. Keith made President. Everyone celebrating. And here we are, a million years late, and they don't exist. The things we worried about for months, a lifetime, not even born or thought about yet."

"Safety catches off, everyone!" ordered Travis.

"You, first shot, Eckels. Second, Billings. Third, Kowder."

"I've hunted tiger, wild boar, buffalo, elephant, but man, this is it," said Eckels. "I'm shaking like a kid."

"Ah," said Travis.

Everyone stopped.

Travis raised his hand. "Ahead," he whispered, "in the mist. There he is. There's His Royal Majesty now."

The jungle was wide and full of twisterings, castlings, murmurs, and sighs.

Suddenly it all ceased, as if someone had shut a door.

Silence.

A sound of thunder.

Out of the mist, one hundred yards away, came *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

"Good heavens," whispered Eckels.

"Sh!"

It came on great oiled, resilient, striding legs. It towered thirty feet above half of the trees, a great evil god, folding its delicate watchmaker's claws close to its oily reptilian chest. Each lower leg was a piston, a thousand pounds of white bone, sunk in thick ropes of muscle, sheathed over in a gleam of pebbled skin like the mail of a terrible warrior. Each thigh was a ton of meat, ivory, and steel mesh. And from the great breathing cage of the upper body those two delicate arms dangled out front, arms with hands which might pick up and examine men like toys, while the snake neck coiled, and the head itself, a ton of sculptured stone, lifted easily upon the sky. Its mouth gaped, exposing a fence of teeth like daggers. Its eyes rolled, ostrich eggs, empty of all expression save hunger. It closed its mouth in a death grin. It ran, its pelvic bones crushing aside trees and bushes, its taloned feet chewing damp earth, leaving prints six inches deep wherever it settled its weight. It ran with a gliding ballet step, far too poised and balanced for its ten tons. It moved into a sunlit arena warily, its beautifully reptile hands feeling the air.

"My God!" Eckels twitched his mouth.

"It could reach up and grab the moon."

"Sh!" Travis jerked angrily. "He hasn't seen us yet."

"It can't be killed," Eckels pronounced this verdict quietly, as if there could be no argument. He had weighed the evidence and this was his considered opinion. The rifle in his hands seemed a cap-gun. "We were fools to come. This is impossible."

"Shut up!" hissed Travis.

"Nightmare."

"Turn around," commanded Travis. "Walk quietly to the Machine. We'll wait one half your fee."

"I didn't realize it would be this big," said Eckels, "I miscalculated, that's all. And now I want out."

"It says no!"

"There's the red point on its chest!"

The Thunder Lizard raised itself. Its armored flesh glittered like a thousand green coins. The coins, crusted with slime, steamed. In the slime, tiny insects wriggled, so that the entire body seemed to twitch and undulate, even while the monster itself did not move, it coiled. The stink of raw flesh blew down the wilderness.

"Get me out of here," said Eckels. "It was never like this before. I was always sure I'd come through alive. I had good guides, good safes, and safety. This time, I figured wrong. I've met my match and admit it. This is too much for me to get hold of."

"Don't run," said Lorraine. "Turn around. Hide in the Machine."

"Yes," Eckels seemed to be numb. He looked at his feet as if trying to make them move. He gave a grant of helplessness.

"Eckels!"

He took a few steps, blinking, shuffling.

"Not that way!"

The Monster, at the first motion, lunged forward with a terrible scream. It covered one hundred yards in four seconds. The rifles jerked up and blazed fire. A wind-storm from the beast's mouth engulfed them in the stench of slime and old blood. The Monster roared, teeth glittering with saw.

Eckels, not looking back, walked blindly to the edge of the Path, his gun limp in his arms, slipped off the Path, and walked, not knowing it, in the jungle. His feet sank into green moss. His legs moved him, and he felt alone and remote from the events behind.

The rifles cracked again. Their sound was lost in shriek and hoarse thunder. The great lever of the reptile's tail swung up, lashed sideways. Trees exploded in clouds of leaf and branch. The Monster twitched its jeweler's hands down to fondle at the men, to twist them in half, to crush them like berries, to cram them into its teeth and its streaming throat. Its boulder-size eyes leveled with the men. They saw themselves mirrored. They died at the metallic eyelids and the blazing black ink.

Like a stone sled, like a mountain avalanche, *Tyrannosaurus* fell. Thundering, it clutched trees, pulled them with it. It wrenched and tore the metal Path. The men flung themselves back and away. The body

hit, ten tons of cold flesh and stone. The guns fired. The Monster lashed its armored tail, twitched its snake jaws, and lay still. A fountain of blood spouted from its throat. Somewhere inside, a sea of fluids burst. Sickening gushes drenched the hunters. They stood, red and glittering.

The thunder faded.

The jungle was silent. After the avalanche, a green peace. After the nightmare, morning.

Billings and Kramer sat on the pathway and threw up. Travis and Lesperance stood with smoking rifles, cursing steadily.

In the Time Machine, on his face, Eckels lay shivering. He had found his way back to the Path, climbed into the Machine.

TRAVIS came walking, glanced at Eckels, took cotton gauze from a metal box, and returned to the others, who were sitting on the Path.

"Clean up."

They wiped the blood from their helmets. They began to curse too. The Monster lay, a hill of solid flesh. Within, you could hear the sighs and murmurs as the furthest chambers of it died, the organs malfunctioning. Liquids running a final instant from pocket to sac to spleen, everything shutting off, closing up forever. It was like standing by a wrecked locomotive or a steam shovel at quitting time, all valves being released or leveled tight. Boxes cracked; the tonnage of its own flesh, off balance, dead weight, snapped the delicate forearms, caught underneath. The meat settled, quivering.

Another cracking sound. Overhead, a gigantic tree branch broke from its heavy mooring, fell. It crashed upon the dead beast with finality.

"There." Lesperance checked his watch.

"Right on time. That's the giant tree that was scheduled to fall and kill this animal originally." He glanced at the two hunters.

"You want the trophy picture?"

"What?"

"We can't take a trophy back to the Future. The body has to stay right here where it would have died originally, so the insects, birds, and bacteria can get at it, as they were intended to. Everything in balance. The body stays. But we can take a picture of you standing near it."

The two men tried to think, but gave up, shaking their heads.

They let themselves be led along the metal Path. They sank wearily into the Machine cushions. They gazed back at the ruined Monster, the disgusting mound, where already strange reptilian birds and golden insects were busy at the steaming armor.

A sound on the floor of the Time Machine stiffened them. Eckels sat there, shivering.

"I'm sorry," he said at last.

"Get up!" cried Travis.

Eckels got up.

"Go out on that Path alone," said Travis. He had his rifle pointed. "You're not coming back in the Machine. We're leaving you here!"

Lesperance asked Travis' arm, "Wait—"

"Stay out of this!" Travis shook his hand away. "This son of a bitch nearly killed us. But it isn't *over* so much. Hell, no. It's *his* *shoot*! Look at them! He ran off the Path. My God, that rats us! Who knows how much we'll forfeit! Tens of thousands of dollars of insurance! We guarantee no one leaves the Path. He left it. Oh, the damn fool! I'll have to report to the government. They might revoke our license to travel. God knows *what* he's done to Time, to History!"

"Take it easy, all he did was kick up some dirt."

"How do we *know*?" cried Travis. "We don't know anything! It's all a damn mystery! Get out there Eckels!"

Eckels fumbled his shirt. "I'll pay anything. A hundred thousand dollars!"

Travis glanced at Eckels' checkbook and spat. "Go out there. The Monster's next to the Path. Stick your arms up to your elbows in his mouth. Then you can come back with us."

"That's unreasonable!"

"The Monster's dead, you yellow bastard. The bullets! The bullets can't be left behind. They don't belong in the Past; they might change something. Here's my knife. Dig them out!"

He returned, shuddering, five minutes later, his arms soaked and red to the elbows. He held out his hands. Each held a number of steel bullets. Then he fell.

He lay where he fell, not moving.

"You didn't have to make him do that," said Lesperance.

"Didn't I? It's too early to tell." Travis nudged the still body. "He'll live. Next time he won't go hunting game like this. Okay." He jerked his thumb wearily at Lesperance. "Switch on. Let's go home."

1692. 1776. 1812.

They cleaned their hands and faces. They changed their caking shirts and pants. Eckels was up and around again, not speaking. Travis glared at him for a full ten minutes.

1999. 2000. 2035.

The Machine stopped.

"Get out," said Travis.

THE room was there as they had left it. But not the same as they had left it. The same man sat behind the same desk. But the same man did not quite sit behind the same desk.

Travis looked around swiftly. "Everything okay here?" he snapped.

"Fine. Welcome home."

Travis did not relax. He seemed to be looking at the very storms of the air itself, at the way the sun poured through the one high window.

"Okay, Eckels, get out. Don't ever come back."

Eckels could not move.

"You heard me," said Travis. "What're you *doing* at?"

Eckels stood smelling of the air, and there was a thing to the air, a chemical taint so subtle, so slight, that only a faint cry of his subliminal senses warned him it was there. The colors, white, gray, blue, orange, in the wall, in the furniture, in the sky beyond the window, were . . . were . . . And there was a feel. His flesh twitched. His hands twitched. He stood drinking the oddness with the pores of his body. Somewhere, someone must have been screaming one of those whistles that only a dog can hear. His body screamed silence in return. Beyond this room, beyond this wall, beyond this man who was not quite the same man seated at this desk that was not quite the same desk . . . lay an entire world of streets and people. What sort of world it was now,

there was no telling. He could feel them moving there, beyond the walls, almost, like so many chess pieces blown in a dry wind. . . .

But the immediate thing was the sign painted on the office wall, the same sign he had read earlier today on first entering.

Somehow, the sign had changed:

TYME SEPARI INC.
SEPARS TU ANY TIME IN THE PAST.
TU NAME THE ANIMAL.
WE TALK TU THAIR.
TU SHOOT IT.

Eckels felt himself fall into a chair. He fumbled crazily at the thick sleeve on his boots. He held up a clod of dirt, trembling.

"No, it can't be. Not a *little* thing like that. Not."

Embedded in the mud, glimmering green and gold and black, was a butterfly, very beautiful, and very dead.

"Not a little thing like *that*? Not a butterfly?" cried Eckels.

It fell to the floor, an exquisite thing, a small thing that could upset balances and knock down a line of small dominoes and then big dominoes and then gigantic dominoes, all down the years across Time. Eckels' mind whirled. It *couldn't* change things. Killing one butterfly couldn't be *that* important! Could it?

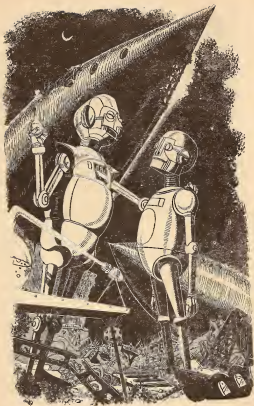
His face was cold. His mouth trembled, asking: "Who—who won the presidential election yesterday?"

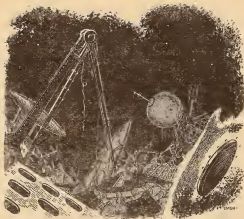
The man behind the desk laughed. "You joking? You know damn well, Deutscher, of course! Who else? Not that damn weakling Keith. We got an iron man now, a man with guts, by God!" The official stopped. "What's wrong?"

Eckels moaned. He dropped to his knees. He scrubbed at the golden butterfly with shaking fingers. "Can't we," he pleaded to the world, to himself, to the officials, to the Machine, "can't we take it *back*, can't we *undo* it alive again? Can't we start over? Can't we—"

He did not move. Eyes shut, he waited, shivering. He heard Travis breathe loud in the room; he heard Travis shift his rifle, click the safety catch, and raise the weapon.

There was a sound of thunder.





B-12's MOON GLOW

By CHARLES A. STEARNS

Among the metal-persons of Phobos, robot B-12 held a special niche. He might not have been stronger, larger, faster than some.... but he could be devious... and more important, he was that junkyard planetoid's only moonshiner.

I AM B-12, a metal person. If you read *Day* and the other progressive journals you will know that in some quarters of the galaxy there is considerable prejudice directed against us. It is ever so with minority races, and I do not complain. I merely make this statement so that you will understand about the alarm clock.

An alarm clock is a simple mechanism used by the Builders to shock themselves into consciousness after the periodic comas to which they are subject. It is obsolescent,

but still used in such out of the way places as Phobos.

My own contact with one of these devices came about in the following manner:

I had come into Argon City under cover of darkness, which is the only sensible thing to do, in my profession, and I was stealing through the back alleyways as silently as my rusty joints would allow.

I was less than three blocks from Benny's Place, and still undetected, when I passed the window. It was a large, cheerful oblong

of light, so quite naturally I stopped to investigate, being slightly phototropic, by virtue of the selenium grids in my sensitive cells. I went over and looked in, unobtrusively testing my grapples on the outer ledge.

There was a Builder inside such as I had not seen since I came to Phobos half a century ago, and yet I recognized the subspecies at once, for they are common on Earth. It was a she.

It was in the process of removing certain outer sheaths, and I noted that, while quite symmetrical, bilaterally, it was otherwise oddly formed, being disproportionately large and lumpy in the anterior ventral region.

I had watched for some two or three minutes, entirely forgetting my own safety, when the she saw me. Its eyes widened and it snatched up the alarm clock which was, as I have hinted, near at hand.

"Get out of here, you sneaky old tin can!" it screamed, and threw the clock, which came off my headpiece, damaging one earphone. I ran.

If you still do not see what I mean about racial prejudice, you will, when you hear what happened later.

I continued on until I came to Benny's Place, entering through the back door. Benny met me there, and quickly shooed me into a side room. His fluorescent eyes were glowing with excitement.

Benny's real name is BNE-96, and when on Earth he had been only a Servitor, not a General Purpose like myself.

But perhaps I should explain.

We metal people are the children of the Builders of Earth, and later of Mars and Venus. We were not born of two parents, as they are. That is a function far too complex to explain here; in fact I do not even understand it myself. No, we were born of the hands and intellects of the greatest of their scientists, and for this reason it might be natural to suppose that we, and not they, would be considered a superior race. It is not so.

Many of us were fashioned in those days, a metal person for every kind of task that they could devise, and some, like myself, who could do almost anything. We were contented enough, for the greater part, but

the scientists kept creating, always striving to better their former efforts.

And one day the situation which the Builders had always regarded as inevitable, but we, somehow, had supposed would never come, was upon us. The first generation of the metal people—more than fifty thousand of us—were obsolete. The things that we had been designed to do, the new ones, with their crystalline brains, fresh, untarnished, accomplished better.

We were banished to Phobos, dreary, lifeless moon of Mars. It had long been a sort of interplanetary junkyard; now it became a graveyard.

UPON the barren face of this little world there was no life except for the handful of hardy Martian and Terrestrial prospectors who searched for minerals. Later on, a few rude mining communities sprang up under plastic airdomes, but never came to much. Argon City was such a place.

I wonder if you can comprehend the loneliness, the hollow futility of our plight. Fifty thousand skilled workmen with nothing to do. Some of the less adaptable gave up, prostrating themselves upon the bare rocks until their joints froze from lack of use, and their works corroded. Others served the miners and prospectors, but their needs were all too few.

The overwhelming majority of us were still idle, and somehow we learned the secret of racial existence at last. We learned to serve each other.

This was not an easy lesson to learn. In the first place there must be motivation involved in racial preservation. Yet we derived no pleasure out of the things that make the Builders wish to continue to live. We did not sleep; we did not eat, and we were not able to reproduce ourselves. (And, besides, this latter, as I have indicated, would have been pointless with us.)

There was, however, one other pleasure of the Builders that intrigued us. It can best be described as a stimulation produced by drenching their insides with alcoholic compounds, and is a universal pastime among the males and many of the shees.

One of us—R-47, I think it was (not him)—tried it one day. He pried open the top of his helmet and poured an entire bot-

ble of the fluid down his mechanism.

Post R-47. He caught fire and blossed up in a glorious blue flame that we could not extinguish in time. He was beyond repair, and we were forced to scrap him.

But his was not a sacrifice in vain. He had established an idea in our consciousness-burning minds. An idea which led to the discovery of Moon Glow. My discovery, I should say, for I was the first.

Naturally, I cannot divulge my secret formula for Moon Glow. There are many kinds of Moon Glow these days, but there is still only one B-12 Moon Glow.

Suffice it to say that it is a high octane preparation, only a drop of which—but you know the effects of Moon Glow, of course.

How the meek, thimbleful, when judiciously poured into one's power pack, gives new life and the most deliciously happy freedom of movement imaginable. One possesses soaring spirits and super-strength.

Old, rested joints move freely once more, one's transistors glow brightly, and the currents of the body race about with the merriest resistance. Moon Glow is like being born again.

The sale of it has been illegal for several years, for no reason that I can think of except that the Builders, who make the laws, can not bear to see metal people have fun.

Of course, a part of the blame rests on such individuals as X-101, who, when lubricated with Moon Glow, insists upon dancing around on large, cushion feet to the hazard of all toes in his vicinity. He is thin and long jointed, and he goes "creek, creek," in a weird, sing-song fashion as he dances. It is a shameful, ludicrous sight.

Then there was DC-3, who tore down the 300 foot long equipment hanger of the Builders one night. He had over-indulged!

I DO not feel responsible for these things. If I had not sold them the Moon Glow, someone else would have done so. Besides, I am only a wholesaler. Benny buys everything that I am able to produce in my little laboratory hidden out in the Dumps.

Just now, by Benny's attitude, I know that something was very wrong. "What is the matter?" I said. "Is it the revenue agents?"

"I do not know," said BNE-96 in that curious, flat voice of his that is incapable of

inflection. "I do not know, but there are visitors of importance from Earth. It could mean anything, but I have a premonition of disaster. Jon tipped me off."

He meant Jon Rogeson, of course, who was the peace officer here in Argon City, and the only one of the Builders I had ever met who did not look down upon a metal person. When sober he was a clever person who always looked out for our interests here.

"What are they like?" I asked in some fear, for I had six vials of Moon Glow with me at the moment.

"I have not seen them, but there is one who is high in the government, and his wife. There are half a dozen others of the Builder race, and one of the new type metal persons."

I had met the one who must have been the wife. "They hate us," I said. "We can expect only evil from these persons."

"You may be right. If you have any merchandise with you, I will take it, but do not risk bringing more here until they have gone."

I produced the vials of Moon Glow, and he paid me in Phobos credits, which are good for a specified number of refreshings at the Central fueling station.

Benny got the vials away and he went into the bar. There was the usual jostling crowd of hard-bitten Earth miners, and of the metal people who come to lose their loneliness. I recognized many, though I spend very little time in these places, preferring solitary pursuits, such as the distillation of Moon Glow, and improving my mind by study and contemplation out in the barrens.

Jon Rogeson and I saw each other at the same time, and I did not like the expression in his eye as he crooked a finger at me. I went over to his table. He was pleasant looking, as Builders go, with blue eyes less dull than most, and a brown, usually topknot of hair such as is universally affected by them.

"Sit down," he invited, revealing his white incisors in greeting.

I never sit, but this time I did so, to be polite. I was wary, ready for anything. I knew that there was something unpleasant in the air. I wondered if he had seen me passing the Moon Glow to Benny somehow. Perhaps he had barrier-penetrating vision,

like the Z group of metal people . . . but I had never heard of a Builder like that. I knew that he had long suspected that I made Moon Glow.

"What do you want?" I asked cautiously.

"Come on now," he said, "loosen up! Limber those stainless steel hinges of yours and be friendly."

That made me feel good. Actually, I am somewhat pitted with rust, but he never seems to notice, for he is like that. I felt young, as if I had partaken of my own product.

"The fact is, B-12," he said, "I want you to do me a favor, old pal."

"And what is that?"

"Perhaps you have heard that there is some big brass from Earth visiting Phobos this week."

"I have heard nothing," I said. It is often helpful to appear ignorant when questioned by the Builders, for they believe us to be incapable of misrepresenting the truth. The fact is, though it is an acquired trait, and not built into us, we General Purposes can lie as well as anyone.

"Well, there is. A Federation Senator, no less. Simon F. Langley. It's my job to keep them entertained; that's where you come in."

I was mystified. I had never heard of this Langley, but I know what entertainment is. I had a mental image of myself singing or dancing before the Senator's party. But I can not sing very well, for three of my voice reeds are broken and have never been replaced, and lateral motion, for me, is almost impossible these days. "I do not know what you mean," I said. "There is J-66. He was once an Entertainment—"

"No, no!" he interrupted, "you don't get it. What the Senator wants is a guide. They're making a survey of the Dumps, though I'll be damned if I can find out why. And you know the Dumps better than any metal person—or human—on Phobos."

So that was it. I felt a vague dread, a premonition of disaster. I had such feelings before, and usually with reason. This too, was an acquired sensibility, I am sure. For many years I have studied the Builders, and there is much to be learned of their mobile faces and their eyes. In Jon's eyes, however, I read no trickery—nothing.

Yet, I say, I had the sensation of evil. It was just for a moment; no longer.

I said I would think it over.

SENATOR LANGLEY was disinclined, Jon said so. And yet he was comfortably sound, and he rattled incessantly of things into which I could interpret no meaning. The she who was his wife was much younger, and sullen, and unpleasantly I sensed great rapport between her and Jon Rogerson from the very first.

There were several other humans in the group—I will not call them Builders, for I did not hold them to be, in any way, superior to my own people. They all wore spectacles, and they gravitated about the round body of the Senator like minor moons, and I could tell that they were some kind of servants.

I will not describe them further.

MS-33 I will describe. I felt an unconscionable hatred for him at once. I can not say why, except that he hung about his master obsequiously, power pack smoothly purring, and he was slim limbed, nickel-plated, and wore, I thought, a strong expression on his visiplast. He represented the new order; the ones who had displaced us on Bath. He knew too much, and showed it at every opportunity.

We did not go far that first morning. The half-track was driven to the edge of the Dumps. Within the Dumps one walks—or does not go. Phobos is an surface world, and yet so small that rockets are impractical. The terrain is broken and littered with the refuse of half a dozen worlds, but the Dumps themselves—that is different.

Imagine, if you can, an endless vista of death, a sea of rusting corpses of space ships, and worn-out mining machinery, and of those of my race whose power packs burned out, or who simply gave up, retiring into this endless, corroding limbo of the havers. A more sinister sight was never seen.

But this fat ghoul, Langley, sickened me. This shame of the Builder race, this stardom—this beast—rubbed his fat, impractical hands together with an ungod-like glee. "Excellent," he said, "Far, far better, in fact, than I had hoped." He did not divide.

I looked at Jon Rogeson. He shook his head slowly.

"You there—robot!" said Langley, looking at me. "How far across this place?" The word was like a blow. I could not answer.

MS-33, glowering at the dying light of Mars, strode over to me, clanking heavily up on the black rocks. He seized me with his grapples and shook me until my wiring was in danger of shorting out. "Speak up when you are spoken to, archaic mechanism!" he grated.

I would have struck out at him, but what use except to warp my own aging limbs.

Jon Rogeson came to my rescue. "On Phobos," he explained to Langley, "we don't use that word 'robot.' These folk have been free a long time. They've quite a culture of their own nowadays, and they like to be called 'metal people.' As a return courtesy, they refer to us humans as 'buddens.' Just a custom, Senator, but if you want to get along with them—"

"Can they vote?" said Langley, grinning at his own sour humor.

"Nonsense," said MS-33. "I am a robot, and proud of it. This rusty piece has no call to put on airs."

"Release him," Langley said. "Droll fellows, these discarded robots. Really nothing but mechanical dolls, you know, but I think the old scientists made a mistake, giving them such human appearance, and such obstinate traits."

Oh, it was true enough, from his point of view. We had been mechanical dolls at first, I suppose, but fifty years can change one. All I know is this: we are people; we think and feel, and are happy and sad, and quite often we are bored stiff with this dreary moon of Phobos.

It scared me. My uranium cells throbbed white hot within the shell of my frame, and I made up my mind that I would learn more about the mission of this Langley, and I would get even with MS-33 even if they had me dismantled for it.

Of the rest of that week I recall few pleasant moments. We went out every day, and the quick-eyed servants of Langley measured the area with their instruments, and exchanged significant looks from be-

hind their spectacles, snug in their thin air helmets. It was all very mysterious. And disturbing.

But I could discover nothing about their mission. And when I questioned MS-33, he would look important and say nothing. Somehow it seemed vital that I find out what was going on before it was too late.

On the third day there was a strange occurrence. My friend, Jon Rogeson had been taking pictures of the Dumps, Langley and his wife had withdrawn to one side and were talking in low tones to one another. Quite thoughtlessly Jon turned the lens on them and clicked the shutter.

Langley became red-red throughout the vast expanse of his neck and face. "Here!" he said, "what are you doing?"

"Nothing," said Jon.

"You took a picture of me," snarled Langley. "Give me the plate at once."

Jon Rogeson got a bit red himself. He was not used to being ordered around. "I'll be damned if I will," he said.

Langley growled something I couldn't understand, and turned his back on us. The one who was called his wife looked startled and worried. Her eyes were beseeching as she looked at Jon. A message there, but I could not read it. Jon looked away.

Langley started walking back to the half track alone. He turned once and there was evil in his gaze as he looked at Jon. "You will lose your job for this impertinence," he said with quiet savagery, and added, emphatically, "not that there will be a job after this week anyway."

Buddens may appear to act without reason, but there is always a motivation somewhere in their complex brains, if one can only find it, either in the seat of reason, or in the labyrinthine inhibitions from their childhood. I knew this, because I had studied them, and now there were certain notions that came into my brain which, even if I could not prove them, were no less interesting for that.

THE time had come to act. I could scarcely wait for darkness to come. There were things in my brain that appalled me, but I was now certain that I had been right. Something was about to happen to Phobos, to all of us here—I knew not what,

but I must prevent it somehow.

I kept in the shadows of the shabby buildings of Argon City, and I found the window without effort. The place where I had spied upon the wife of Langley to my sorrow the other night. There was no one there; there was darkness within, but that did not deter me.

Within the sordidness which covers Argon City the buildings are loosely constructed, even as they are on Earth. I had no trouble, therefore, opening the window. I swung a leg up and was presently within the darkened room. I found the door I sought and entered cautiously. In this adjacent compartment I made a thorough search but I did not find what I primarily sought—namely the elusive reason for Langley's visit to Phobos. It was in a metallic overnight bag that I did find something else which made my power pack burn so loudly that I was afraid of being heard. The thing which explained the strangeness of the pompous Senator's attitude today—which explained, in short, many things, and caused my brain to race with new ideas.

I put the thing in my chest container, and left as stealthily as I had come. There had been progress, but since I had not found what I hoped to find, I must now try my alternate plan.

Two hours later I found the one I sought, and made sure that I was seen by him. Then I left Argon City by the South lock, furtively, as a thief, always glancing over my shoulder, and when I made certain that I was being followed, I went swiftly, and it was not long before I was clambering over the first heaps of debris at the edge of the Dumps.

Once I thought I heard footsteps behind me, but when I looked back there was no one in sight. Just the tiny disk of Deimos peering over the sharp peak of the nearest ridge, the black velvet sky outlining the curvature of this useless moon.

Presently I was in sight of home, the time-eaten hull of an ancient air freighter resting near the top of a heap of junked equipment from some old strip mining operation. It would never rise again, but its shell remained strong enough to shelter my distillery and ware furnishings from any chance radioactive that might fall.

I greeted it with the usual warmth of feeling which one has for the safe and the familiar. I marveled over tin fuel cans, wires and other tangled metal in my haste to get there.

It was just as I had left it. The heating element under the network of coils and pressure chambers still glowed with white heat, and the Moon Glow was dripping with musical sound into the rector.

I felt good. No one ever bothered me here. This was my fortress, with all that I cared for inside. My tools, my work, my macro-library. And yet I had deliberately—

Something—a heavy foot—clanked upon the first step of the manport through which I had entered.

I turned quickly. The foam shimmered in the pale Deimoslight that illuminated it. MS-53.

He had followed me here.

"What do you want?" I said. "What are you doing here?"

"A simple question," said MS-53. "Tonight you looked very suspicious when you left Argon City. I saw you and followed you here. You may as well know that I have never trusted you. All the old tales were unreliable. That is why you were replaced."

He came in, boldly, without being invited, and looked around. I detected a smug in his voice as he said, "So this is where you hide."

"I do not hide. I live here, it is true."

"A robot does not live. A robot exists. We newer models do not require shelter like an animal. We are rust-proof and invulnerable." He strode over to my macro-library, several racks of carefully arranged books, and fingered them irreverently.

"What is this?"

"My library."

"Sol Our memories are built into us. We have no need to refresh them."

"So is mine," I said. "But I would learn more than I know." I was stalling for time, waiting until he made the right opening.

"Nonsense," he said. "I know why you stay out here in the Dumps, miserably. I have heard of the forgotten drug that is sold in the mining camps such as Argon City. Is this the mechanism?" He pointed at the still.

Now was the time. I mustered all my

coming, but I could not speak. Not yet.

"Never mind," he said. "I can see that it is. I shall repeat you, of course. It will give me great pleasure to see you dismantled. Not that it really matters, of course—now."

There it was again. The same frightening illusion that Langley had made today. I must succeed!

I KNEW that MS-33, for all his brilliance, and newness, and vaunted superiority, was only a Secretarial. For the age of specialization was upon Earth, and General Purpose models were no longer made. That was why we were different here on Phobos. It was why we had survived. The old ones had given up something special which the new metal people did not have. Moreover, MS-33 had his weakness. He was larger, stronger, faster than me, but I doubted that he could be devious.

"You are right," I said, pretending resignation. "This is my distillery. It is where I make the fluid which is called Moon Glow by the metal people of Phobos. Doubtless you are interested in learning how it works."

"Not even remotely interested," he said. "I am interested only in taking you back and turning you over to the authorities."

"It works much like the conventional distilling plants of Earth," I said, "except that the basic ingredient, a silicon compound, is irradiated as it passes through aluminum tubes to the heating pile, where it is activated and broken down into the droplets of the elixir called Moon Glow. You see the golden drops falling there."

"It has the excellent flavor of fine petroleum, as I make it. Perhaps you'd care to taste it. Then you could understand that it is not really bad at all. Perhaps you could persuade yourself to be more lenient with me."

"Certainly not," said MS-33.

"Perhaps you are right," I said after a moment of reflection. I took a syringe, drew up several drops of the stuff and squirted it into my carapace, where it would do the most good. I felt much better.

"Yes," I continued, "certainly you are quite correct, now that I think of it. You newer models would never bear it. You weren't built to stand such things. Not, for

that matter, could you comprehend the exquisite joys that are derived from M on Glow. Not only would you derive no pleasure from it, but it would corrode your parts, I imagine, until you could scarcely crawl back to your master for repairs." I helped myself to another liberal portion.

"That is the silliest thing I've ever heard," he said.

"What?"

"I said, it's silly. We are constructed to withstand a hundred times greater stress, and twice as many chemical actions as you were. Nothing could hurt us. Besides, it looks harmless enough. I doubt that it is hardly anything at all."

"For me it is not," I admitted. "But you—"

"Give me the syringe, fool!"

"I dare not."

"Give it here!"

I allowed him to wrest it from my grasp. In any case I could not have prevented him. He shoved me backwards against the rusty bulkhead with a clang. He pushed the nozzle of the syringe down into the retractor and withdrew it filled with Moon Glow. He opened an inspection plate in his ventral region and squirted himself generously.

It was quite a dose. He waited for a moment, "I feel nothing," he said finally. "I do not believe it is anything more than common lubricating oil." He was silent for another moment. "There is an ease of movement," he said.

"No paralysis?" I asked.

"Paral—? You stupid, rusty old robot!" He helped himself to another syringeful of Moon Glow. The stuff brought twenty credits an ounce, but I did not begrudge it him.

He flexed his superbly articulated joints in three directions, and I could hear his power unit budding up within him to a whining pitch. He took a shuffling sidestep, and then another, going down at his feet, with arms akimbo.

"The light gravity here is superb, superb, superb, superb, superb," he said, skipping a bit.

"Isn't it?" I said.

"Almost negligible," he said.

"True."

"You have been very kind to me," MS-33

said "Extremely, extraordinarily, incomparably, incalculably kind." He used up all the adjectives in his memory pack. "I wonder if you would mind awfully much if—"

"Not at all," I said. "Help yourself. By the way, friend, would you mind telling me what your real mission of your party is here on Phobos. The Senator forgot to say."

"Secret," he said. "Hearthily top secret. As a dutiful subject—I mean servant—of Earth, I could not, of course, divulge it to anyone. If I could—" his neon eyes glinted, "if I could, you would, of course, be the first to know. The very first." He threw one nickel-plated arm about my shoulder.

"I see," I said, "and just what is it that you are not allowed to tell me?"

"Why, that we are making a preliminary survey here on Phobos, of course, to determine whether or not it is worthwhile to send salvage for scrap. Earth is short of metals, and it depends upon what the old me—the master says in his report."

"You mean they'll take all the derelict spaceships, such as this one, and all the abandoned equipment?"

"And the r-robots," MS-33 said. "They're metal too, you know."

"They're going to take the dismantled robots?"

MS-33 made a sweeping gesture. "They're going to take all the r-robots, dismantled or not. They're not good for anything anyway. The bill is up before the Federation Congress right now. And it will pass if my master, Langley says so." He patted my helmet, consolingly, his grapples clinking. "If you were worth a damn, you know—" he concluded scornfully.

"That's murder," I said. And I meant it. Man's inhumanity to metal people, I thought. Yes—to man, even if we were made of metal.

"How's that?" said MS-33 foggly.

"Have another drop of Moon Glow," I said. "I've got to get back to Argon City."

I MADE it back to Benny's place without incident. I had never moved so swiftly. I sent Benny out to find Jon Rogerson, and presently he brought him back.

I told Rogerson what MS-33 had said, watching his reaction carefully. I could not

forget that though he had been our friend, he was still one of the Builders, a human who thought as humans.

"You comprehend," I said grimly, "that one word of this will bring an uprising of fifty-thousand metal people which can be put down only at much expense and with great destruction. We are free people. The Builders exiled us here, and therefore lost their claim to us. We have as much right to life as anyone, and we do not wish to be melted up and made into printing presses and space ships and the like."

"The damn fools," Jon said softly. "Listen, B-12, you've got to believe me. I didn't know a thing about this, though I've suspected something was up. I'm on your side, but what are we going to do? Maybe they'll listen to reason. Yes—"

"That is the name of the sh—? No, they will not listen to reason. They hate us." I recalled with bitterness the episode of damn clock. "There is a chance, however. I have not been idle this night. If you will go get Langley and meet me in the back room here at Benny's, we will talk."

"But he'll be asleep."

"Awaken him," I said. "Get him here. Your own job is at stake as well, remember."

"I'll get him," Jon said grimly. "Watch him."

I went over to the bar where Benny was serving the miners. Benny had always been my friend. Jon was my friend, too, but he was a Builder. I wanted one of my own people to know what was going on, just in case something happened to me.

We were talking then, in low tones, when I saw MS-33. He came in through the front door, and there was purposefulness in his stride that had not been there when I left him back at the old hulk. The effects of the Moon Glow had worn off much quicker than I had expected. He had come for vengeance. He would tell about my disloyalty, and that would be the end of me. There was only one thing to do and I must do it fast.

"Quick," I ordered Benny. "Douse the lights." He complied. The place was plunged into darkness. I knew that it was darkness and yet, you comprehend, I still sensed everything in the place, for I had

the special visual sensory system bequeathed only to the General Purpose of a bygone age, I could see, but hardly anyone else could, I worked swiftly, and I got what I was after in a very short time. I jacked out of the front door with it and threw it in a silvery arc as far as I could hurl it. It was an intricate little thing which could not, I am sure, have been duplicated on the entire moon of Phobos.

When I returned, someone had put the lights back on, but it didn't matter now. MS-33 was sitting at one of the tables, staring fixedly at me. He said nothing. Benny was motioning for me to come into the back room. I went to him.

Jon Rogeson and Langley were there. Langley looked irritated. He was mumbling strange names and rubbing his eyes.

Rogeson laughed. "You may be interested in knowing, B-12, that I had to arrest him to get him here. This had better be good."

"It is all bad," I said, "very bad—but necessary." I turned to Langley. "It is said that your present survey is being made with the purpose of condemning all of Phobos, the dead and the living alike, to the blast furnaces and the metal shops of Earth. Is this true?"

"Why you impudent, miserable piece of shit! What if I am making a scrap survey? What are you going to do about it. You're nothing but a re—"

"So it is true! But you will tell the salvage ships not to come. It is yours to decide, and you will decide that we are not worth bothering with here on Phobos. You will agree us."

"I" blustered Langley.

"You will." I took the thing out of my breastplate container and showed it to him. He grew pale.

Jon said, "Well, I'll be damned!"

It was a picture of Langley and another. I gave it to Jon. "His wife," I said. "His real wife. I am sure of it, for you will note the inscription on the bottom."

"Then Vera—?"

"Is not his wife. You wonder that he was called a spy?"

"Housebreaker!" roared Langley. "It's a plot; a dirty, reactionary plot!"

"It is what is called blackmail," I said. I turned to Jon. "I am correct about this?"

"You are," Jon said.

"You are instructed to leave Phobos," I said to Langley, "and you will allow my friend here to keep his job as peace officer, for without it he would be lost. I have observed that in these things the Builders are hardly more adaptable than their children, the metal people. You will do all this, and in return, we will not send the picture that Jon took today to your wife, nor otherwise inform her of your transgression. For I am told that this is a transgression."

"It is indeed," agreed Jon gravely. "Right, Langley?"

"All right," Langley snarled. "You win. And the sooner I get out of this hole the better." He got up to go, squeezing his fat form through the door into the bar, past the gaping miners and the metal people, heedless of the metal people. We watched him go with some satisfaction.

"It is no business of mine," I said to Jon, "but I have seen you look with longing upon the she that was not Langley's wife. Since she does not belong to him, there is nothing to prevent you from having her. Should not that make you happy?"

"Are you kidding?" he snarled.

Which proves that I have still much to learn about his race.

Our front, Langley spied his metal servant, MS-33, just as he was going out the door. He turned to him. "What are you doing here?" he asked suspiciously.

MS-33 made no answer. He stared malevolently at the bar, ignoring Langley.

"Come on here, damn you!" Langley said. MS-33 said nothing. Langley went over to him and scored foul things into his car-phases that would corrode one's soul, if one had one. I shall never forget that moment. The scowling, red-faced Langley, the laughing miners.

But he got no reply from MS-33. Not then or ever. And this was scarcely strange, for I had removed his face.

THE WOMAN-STEALERS OF THRAXX

By FOX B. HOLDEN

"And that is why you will take us to Earth, Lieutenant,"
barked the Thelon warrior. *"We do not want your arms*
or your men. What we must ask for is—
ten thousand women."

MASON was nervous. It was the nervousness of cold apprehension, not simply that which had become indigenous to his high-strung make-up. He was, in his way, afraid; afraid that he'd again come up with a wrong answer.

He'd brought the tiny Scout too close to the Rim. Facing the facts squarely, he knew, even as he fingered the stud that would wrench them out of their R-carcs, that he'd not just come too close. He'd overshot entirely. Pardonable, perhaps, from the view-



point of the corps of scientists safely ensconced in their ponderous Mark VII Explorer some fifteen light-days behind. But not according to the g-n manual. According to it, he'd placed the Scout and her small crew in a "situation of avoidable risk," and it would make a doubtful record book that much worse.

The next time he'd out argue Cain with his rank if he had to. Cain was big enough to grab things with his heavy fists and twist them into whatever shape he wanted when the things were tangible, solid, resisting. But R-Space was something else again. Nobody knew what it did beyond the Rim



He materialized the Scout into B-Space, listened for trouble from her computers, but they chuckled softly on, keeping track of where they were, where they'd been, and how they'd get home.

It was as though nothing had happened. But Lieutenant Lansing Mason was still nervous, his slender fingers steady enough, but as cold as the alien dark outside the ship they controlled.

"You look a little shot again, skipper!" Cain said, grinning like a Martian desert cat. "What's the matter, Space goblins got you again?"

A robot started at Mason's taut lips, but his third officer was already speaking.

"Here's a dope sheet from the compe, if anybody's interested in knowing just where outside the Rim we are," she said. "I make it just a shade inside the outermost fringes of the Large Magellanic Cloud." Sergeant Judith Kent's voice had its almost habitually preoccupied tone, as though the words she said were hardly more than incidental to a host of more important thoughts running swiftly behind her wide-set, deep gray eyes. They were serious eyes, and in their way matched the solemn set of her small features and the crisp, military cut of her black hair and severe uniform.

"Our little boss-man knows where we are, all right!" Cain said.

Mason gave Cain's six-foot-two a quick glance, wondering as he always wondered why the big redhead's shoulders always seemed too broad for the Warrant Officer's stripes on them. "Sergeant Kent's right," he said. "Here's her comp-sheet. You can look for yourself. Fringe, Magellanic. And look at that whale you can—" he jabbed a forefinger at the main scanner, its screen studded with unfamiliarly close constellations—"because we're on our way back. Set up a return on the compe, will you, Sergeant?" For all his tenoriness his voice was low, and the words it formed were even and swift.

"Hell, Lancer, this is the sort of stuff the brain trust pays us bonuses for."

"Not out here they don't. Re-drive when you're ready, Sergeant!"

Cain turned from the deep control bank and gave his full attention to the scanner as the slender, efficient girl started feeding a

tape of reversed co-ordinates into the computers.

Mason waited the few necessary seconds, pushed disarranged dark hair out of his eyes and felt the clammy dampness on his forehead, and wished silently to himself that opportunists like Cain were kept where they belonged—on the Slam-Bang Run out of Callisto. That's where the money was. That's where a Warrant like Cain ought to be.

"Ready, sir," he heard Judith saying quietly.

"Hey, skipper!" There was a sudden urgency in Cain's voice, and the equally sudden racket of an MPD alarm going off. Cain was gesturing at the scanner, stubby finger tracing a skewing pip of light. The alarm stopped, and Judith's cool voice was relaying information. "About a thousand miles," she was saying, "max, approximately three hundred tons. Speed—"

BUT Mason wasn't listening. He was watching the pip of light as Cain got the scanner's directional going, tracked it. Suddenly there were others coming as though to meet it, and it swerved violently, obviously in flight. And now there were more yet, this time from the starboard quadrant of the screen.

"Radiation reading, Sergeant!" Mason clipped out.

While the two men watched, Judith read back the cryptic information interpolated by the ship's mass-proximity detector.

"That's not all engine junks!" Cain exclaimed as she finished.

"We don't know what drive they've got," Mason answered. "Could be anything."

"Nuts! You wouldn't get that much from an old-fashioned ion-blust, skipper! That's a shooting war, that's what it is!" There was a glimmer in Cain's narrowed brown eyes; a new edge on his heavy voice. "Which side do we take, boss-man?"

"No side at all," Mason said, hardly moving his lips. "We're getting the hell out of here."

"Look, Lancer. We've got a crew of ten—we've got a couple of m-guns aboard because we're a Scout. No telling how one of those outies may show their gratitude if we pitch in, help their side out. That's what

we're out here for, isn't it? Dig up new stuff for the double-domes to sink their slide-ropes into? Think of the bonus, skipper! Hell, this is made to order!"

Mason turned a quick glance to the girl, but her face told him nothing. It never did when things like this came up between himself and Cain. And it was something he knew he had no right to expect. But he was tired . . . too damn much Space, and there was nothing else he knew how to do.

But this time Cain had a point. Aliens—extra-galactic, even at almost neighbors—and his help one way or the other could mean an engraved invitation, a key to the city.

He turned back to the screen, watched as the careening pipe massed, moved, whirled in an intricate fumble. He didn't want any more mistakes. They'd ground him for good, tell him he'd had his limit of Space, and park him on one of the rest-planets with a pension for the rest of his life.

No, he had to think, and quickly.

Barth had only too recently gotten an entire history of wars out of her system. Perhaps for good, this time. And that was it, that was his answer. Better keep his nose clean—

"For God's sake, skipper," Cain snapped. "Come out of it! This is a natural. We'll clean up!"

"Sergeant Kent! R-drive!"

There was a moment's sensation of nothingness as the Scout made the Euclidean-Berminian Transition; the scanner paled and the segment of the universe it framed twisted, changed.

Cain didn't say anything. He glowered, and Mason could feel the big man's contempt. But he didn't have time for it.

This time there wouldn't be any error. This time he'd be a step ahead of the situation and stay there. "Scratch those reversal co-ordinates, Sergeant! Set up to diverge thirty degrees!"

Cain's sarcasm was little disguised. "Mind if I ask a question?"

"Just stay at ease, Master Cain, until we're out of this!"

Mason watched the scanner's distorted image as the Scout hurtled through a curved pencil of four-point Space; she didn't have a fraction of a powerful Explorer's speed,

and her small powerframe physically limited her to that of light. Yet it could be fast enough, for the aliens might know nothing of Transition technique, or could be as wary as Barthmen of the Rim. His precautions could be needless. But he had seen them and they were war-like, and he had no intention of being followed, either back to the Explorer, or ultimately to Barth itself. He'd have to maintain the diverged course until he was certain.

There was a black pip on the fog-colored scanner. Judith saw it even as he did. There was a fleeting look of fright on her intent young face that she hadn't been able to mask.

Cain saw it too.

"You got a tail, skipper!" he said, and the grin was back on his big freckled face.

Cain was right. The alien was capable of Transition. And he obviously had little fear of the Rim. His ship grew larger in the scanner.

Mason felt his fingers grow cold again.

LANCE told the girl to eject the tape of co-ordinates from the nav-computer, and he took over manually, hoping the compe would keep up. It would be up to him where they went, and up to the compe to keep track of the Scout's position relative to both the Solar System and the Explorer.

His fingers played across the control-levers as though they were the keyboards of a great organ, and he felt his insides writhe as he slipped the hurtling ship back into E-Space, then back to R-level again. He played the tiny craft between levels as though it were a stone skipping across water, and altered course with each Transition with no attempt at plan or pattern. Rivulets of ice water trickled down across his ribs, and the flesh of his thin face was stiff.

"Wrong again," he heard Cain saying. "At least we can tell the brain trust that their precious R-factor is constant beyond the Rim. . . . maybe that'll be worth a buck or two. At least those kids back there are playing around in this galaxy like it was their own front yard. Go on, skipper, take a look yourself!"

Mason didn't have to look. He knew that

he hadn't lost the alien; had known somehow that he wouldn't be able to. Too apparently, their own galaxy, near as it was to the Milky Way, was of the same Space, its continuum forged in the same curvilinear matrices.

"Shall I order our m-guns placed, sir?"

It was Judith, and he knew she had grasped the implications of the situation as quickly as she always did. Sometimes he wondered if she were a computer herself, clad in the graceful body of a young woman rather than in a shell of permatex. And other times. . . .

He didn't even think about his answer. The "No" was automatic.

"I'll give the order, then, myself!" Cain said flatly.

"As you were, Mister Cain!"

"So it's sunk, now, is it? And he was grinning that damn grin again.

"Take it any way you want. If you think three mason cannon will stop a ship that's obviously built for battle, you're hardly thinking well enough for the responsibilities of your post."

"Well listen to who's sounding off! So we're just going to let 'em overhaul us; just let 'em blast us out of Space, or come tramping aboard if they want to!"

Mason didn't reply. He looked at the scanner, and now the alien craft was no longer a dot, but taking definite shape. It would be a couple of hours, yet, perhaps. And then it would have to be the way Cain had said.

The alien overhauled them hardly a billion miles inside the Rim, and Mason offered no resistance when he felt their magnetics touch the Scout and draw it gently to the flank of their great ship. It was necessary to scale down the scanner's field to see the huge shape in its entirety. Beside it, the Scout was like a sparrow's egg.

He punched the stud that would swing in the outer lock as the two craft touched with but the slightest jar.

Cain's barn-door fists were knotted at his sides, and Judith stood quietly, as though waiting for nothing more than the presence of an inspecting officer. But her delicate face was white, and Mason wondered if the brain under that crisp, dark hair was still functioning as a well-disciplined piece of

machinery, or if it felt the same fear that was in his own. He knew what was in Cain's thoughts. But at least when he'd told their small crew the story, they had accepted his decision—and his order to keep the m-guns where they were. So maybe this time it was Cain who was wrong.

The three of them stood in the compact confines of the control bubble, silent, waiting.

And when the alien stepped through their inner attack post and faced them, Mason knew he was not succeeding in keeping his surprise from his features.

The alien could have been human. Even clad in his Spacegear, he was little taller than Cain, and his hair and eyes could have been those of an Earthly Viking of another day. Humanoid, so far as physical appearances went. But in thought—

There was a smile on the Viking face as the alien removed the transparent globe of his helmet. He seemed to realize instinctively that Mason was the Scout's commander.

"I am Kropot," he said. "I extend the greetings of Helios." And he proffered his right hand, Earth fashion, toward Mason.

Lance grasped it as he tried to organize the sudden scramble of his thoughts. It was a strong hand. He could feel the sinews of it beneath its gauntlet; like Cain's, yet different, somehow. "You are peacefully received, and welcome," he said. But there was a hollow sound to his words that he had not been able to help.

The smile still played on the alien's sun-darkened face.

"Thank you. I hope that I use your language not too clumsily. Our teleprobes may have something to be desired in the matter of semantics. You will, I hope, forgive us for taking the liberty of their use. But since you employed no protective screens, and because of the necessity of our meeting—

Cain broke in without hesitation. "I don't know what you've been up to while you've been tagging us, mister, but I—"

"At ease, Mister Cain!" Mason snapped. "We must allow our guest to explain his action and his mission."

The alien nodded slightly, glanced at Judith.

"IT WAS your women officer aboard," he began. "When we became aware that you also represented a bisexual race, as do we, we realized at once that you afforded us an unexpected opportunity. Otherwise, we should have remained at our business and spared you this intrusion.

"We of Ithelos, as you doubtless have noted, are at war. It is perhaps not war as your culture understands it; it is perhaps more accurately described by your word 'feud,' I think, and it has continued between us and our only similar neighbor, the planet of Thrax, for many thousands of your years.

"We have been quite self-sufficient cultures for all that time, and have taken great care that our conflict not infect any other area in either our galaxy or yours, for neither of us, by inherent nature, is war-like in the sense of aggressiveness. Our conflict is between us and us alone.

"However, we of Ithelos recently received a staggering setback from our traditional enemy due to a certain unexpected innovation in their battle techniques, and we realized that our cause could end only in eventual defeat. As it shall, unless your people will help us."

There was a moment of silence, and Mason found himself wondering how often this had happened in Earth's own bitter past. It was, wherever men lived, an old story.

"What," Cain was asking, "is in this for us?"

"Could you tell us," Judith said before the alien could answer Cain, "just why you chose us? Certainly, you must have noticed our techniques of warfare are quite inferior to your own. We have not employed them for more than two hundred years—"

"Nor," Mason finished for her, "do we intend to again. You must seek help elsewhere, sir."

"That, for us, would be quite impossible," the alien replied slowly. "The chances of finding other life forms like our own are billions to one, the immensity of both our galaxies notwithstanding. Had you not ventured within range of our weapons we would in all probability never know you existed. And to organize a search. . . ." and now the smile on his lips was almost a sad

thing, "a search of two galaxies—it would take us across, even at a thousand times the speed of light, simply to cover the vast distances involved, to say nothing of finding a similar life and thought form. And we do not have across, Lieutenant. We have but two—these, at most—generations.

"There is too little time to search for allies. We have no other choice, as you can see, than to take what advantage we can of those upon whom we may chance."

"But as my sergeant has already pointed out," Mason said, "our army would be worthless to you. And, more importantly, we wish no more part in warfare. I am afraid, in that respect, you must excuse us, sir. . . . It has been a pleasure to have you aboard."

And suddenly, the smile was gone from the alien's face.

"I must demand of you, then—force you, if necessary—to take us to your planet, Lieutenant. For you can quite obviously help us. It is not your arms we want."

"I fail to understand you sir," Mason felt the icy sweat start again, repressed a shiver as it trickled the length of his spare body.

"Our planet, as our enemy's, is encircled by a wide ring of floating cosmic debris," the alien said. "In both instances, the rings are remnants of what once may have been satellites. In the ring which encloses us, we have successfully secreted refrigerated, lead-sheathed stores of male sperm, quite impossible for our enemy to locate. That is a necessity, of course, for any race that is constantly at war and is obliged to take all possible safeguards to insure its continued existence. We assume that Thrax has done the same.

"However, our cell stores are useless if they lack ova to fertilize. On their last attack, Thraxian ships succeeded in penetrating our innermost planetary defenses, and heavily damaged a number of our cities. Many of our women and young were victims.

"We therefore evacuated our planet's entire female population to an uninhabited world far distant. It was a young world and covered with thick forests, much like the labor planetoid which circles Thrax, and we believed our breeders would be quite sufficiently camouflaged."

"Breeders?" Cain broke in.

"Our philosophy concerning women is slightly different than your own," the alien said. And then he resumed, "But in our haste we underestimated our enemy's cleverness. They're scouts located the planet, destroyed it, our women, and our seeds."

"And that is why you will take us to Earth, Lieutenant. We do not want your arms or your men. What we must ask for is—ten thousand of your women!"

II

A CEPHEID Variable winked tauntingly at the edge of the Milky Way, the Large Magellanic Cloud grown like diamonds in a vast cosmic space behind it. It commensated in glorious display as, far off, a great silvery ship of Space and a tiny jet of man-made metal retained their headlong motion through the mighty legion of the stars.

And then for an instant, the Cepheid's bright wink was dulled; eclipsed. A tapering streamlined shape slipped silently across it, and then was gone in the blackness, and the white dwarf resumed its brilliant display.

But the commander of the Cepheid's interceptor had been giving little time to appreciation of the myriad beauties in the great darkness that had swallowed her ship. She had tumbled her screens and had taxed her craft's colossal power installation to its limit, forcing it to absorb and convert every erg of radiant energy possible as it labored to maintain the awful output necessary to cling to the very edge of E-space, barely clear of the E-continuum itself.

She might have been an Amazon of Earth save for the great intelligence behind the high plane of her forehead, yet she was not without beauty, nor were those of her ship's complement. On their close-fitting uniforms were emblazoned the Planet-and-Circle insignia of their homeland, for they were of the galactic hosts of Thyra.

"They proceed toward a planet on the near side of this galaxy called Earth," the second officer said. "Their mission is to replenish their supply of breeders."

"You are certain of that?"

"I admit it is possible, for the breeders

they seek are women of that planet."

"If certain?"

"Yes. However, the Earthmen's minds indicated a strong tendency to refuse cooperation."

"I see. Do you think our probe was detected?"

"No. I withdrew it immediately when the Earthmen were taken aboard the Italian destroyer."

There was a long moment of silence. The commander's eyes stared unwaveringly on the control sphere mounted in gimbals before her. They remained concentrated on it when she spoke again.

"Women, you say. Hardly conceivable, Dutch, unless—unless it was not simply a penal planetoid which we destroyed!"

"A startling thought, Lady!"

"Yes. And the Earthmen, you say, did not have cooperative thoughts?"

"That is correct. They are not taking the Italian craft to their planet of their own volition."

"That is difficult to understand, Dutch, for the Italians are like ourselves in at least one respect. They are not aggressors. And if they are refused their strange request, they will leave the planet Earth peacefully. But if they are not refused it, perhaps the Earthmen's superiors will cooperate, Dutch! In which case—"

"Whatever their mission, it is our duty to prevent its success, Lady. But to do this without violating the Book, without interfering a foreign area of the galaxy with our conflict?"

"I think there is a way," the commander said. She twisted the sphere slightly, and again the two tiny pups it held were caught squarely at the intersection of the curving light tracings within it. "There is a way," she said. "Give me a complete description of the clothing these Earthmen wore Dutch..."

A tapering, streamlined shape did shadow-like across the face of an undulating globular cluster, and then was swallowed quickly in the strange gray void of hyper-space.

MASON and Judith waited outside the towering New United Nations building in Greater San Francisco, their chaudi-

feared government helio parked on a sky-ramp adjacent to the three hundredth floor.

They waited for Kriljori; they had been assigned, as Earthmen best acquainted with the alien, as his official hosts during his stay on their planet. Mason had protested, but Judith had kept the protests from reaching the wrong ears.

"You won't make any mistakes. You're home, now!" she had whispered. "After all, he's only human!"

It had been the first time Mason had heard a hint of levity in her voice, and he had liked it, and decided to take the assignment gracefully. And, the orders said, Sergeant Judith Kent went with the assignment. Without Cain!

He hardly felt nervous at all as they waited for the Italian to leave the General Council chamber.

"Wonder how he made out?" he said idly, offering the girl a self-lighting cigarette. "Been at there for hours. . . ."

"We'll know soon enough," she said. "But I—I personally can't conceive of it, sir. Of course, the New-UN is very practiced in dealing with all kinds of cultures. Remember the time they had with those awful five-legged things from Cavis Major? Wanted to trade all the tritium we'd need to blow up a planet just for trees; because they worshipped trees! Any and all kinds of trees. . . ."

Mason smiled. He was good looking when he smiled and the Space-tension was gone from his slate-colored eyes. "I remember. But it looks as though they're going to have the toughest time with somebody just like us—two legs, two arms, oxygen-breathing. . . . Women, the man said, just what the devil does he expect us to do? Draft 'em? Have an international lot drawing?"

SHE smoked quietly, and her gray eyes were thoughtful. "A matter of viewpoint, sir," she said finally. "As it always is. To them, females are for breeding only, to keep their war machine well stocked. From what Kriljori said, they do not understand love as we do. There's simply one purpose. . . ."

"Well, that's why I think the whole thing is—well, as you say, miserable from our point of view. Our culture, our

women just aren't conditioned for such an existence."

"Think back two centuries, sir."

"You don't have to keep calling me 'sir' like that!" Mason said, feeling a sudden warmth at the back of his neck as he said it. And then, "Two centuries? Back. Yes. After every war, Earth's birth rate would go crazy. Mother Nature ruled the roost in those days, didn't she? Supply and demand, cause and effect. It's a wonder Man ever got anywhere."

"More wonder some men do—"

Mason looked up. But Judith's face was, as usual, quite calm and detached. "You say something?"

"I said I'd like to have you get Kriljori to demonstrate that teleprobe thing of his for us, if you can, s— Lance. How did he say it worked?"

"I still don't get it completely. A peculiar mixture of radio and the electroencephalograph, I think. He said it replaced radio on Ithos and Thrax centuries ago. You can communicate to a group or an individual with it in language, or in basic thought pictures. That's what they use it mostly for, of course, and as such, it's termed a mentacorn. But he told me that it can also be used as it was on us as a teleprobe when the subject isn't screened. They use a specially tuned carrier wave of some sort, he said, that imprints on a thought wave pattern, but instead of registering the pattern's electronic impulse equivalents as does the electroencephalograph, it 'reflects' them. Like a basic radar system. And the receiver, it's a tiny thing, breaks the reflected pattern down into values equivalent to those in which the 'listener' thinks, amplifies, and that's it! Mind reading made easy, I guess."

Judith squirmed a little uneasily. "I'm glad they're not natural telepaths, anyway," she answered. "And even with a gimmick like that—"

And then the conversation was lost as Kriljori, flanked by two New-UN guides, strode from the building. The stiff breeze at three hundred stories of what had once been called Neb Hill fluffed his scarlet short-cape behind him and rippled the broad front of his black and silver tunic.

He climbed into the helio with a smiled greeting, seated himself to Judith's right as

he knew Barth custom demanded, and the craft was lifting slowly over the central area of the ancient city before Mason spoke.

"Well, how did they treat you in there, sir?"

"Not as well as I had hoped," Krifjorl answered. "Your President-General spoke with me privately after the World Delegates Council met to question me, and he held out extremely little hope. However, the issue is to be debated. I think perhaps more out of diplomatic courtesy than actual consideration. I am to be informed of the official decision tomorrow. . . ."

"There were scientists present, of course?"

"Yes; you have brilliant men on Earth, Lieutenant. They are good thinkers. I am certain they were interested in me for more than the sole fact that I am an alien of a race so precisely a replica of your own. But it is again the old factor, cultural difference. Your entire world simply regards women differently than we. I imagine my request, to persons less learned than those with whom I spoke, would be quite shocking anywhere on the planet."

"Perhaps," Judith murmured. "Yet somehow I wonder. Somehow I wonder how much two hundred years has really changed us. Our history in such things is not pleasant, Krifjorl. Many of our women once gave their bodies for money. Shock us? I'm not sure you really could. For your breeders simply give their bodies to produce the flesh for war. And there was a time when we did that, too."

There was silence between them for a while, and then Lance began directing the Ithian's attention to points of interest as the air phase of the diplomatic tour got under way.

The blue-green beauty of the Pacific stretched fully below them from the colorful Californian shore line to the west. Surrounding air traffic was light, and the tour proceeded smoothly eastward; over the Great Divide, and then swung north. Krifjorl seemed impressed and grateful for the momentary respite.

IT WAS near the end of the tour's air phase that Mason remembered Judith's request, and Krifjorl obliged with an

amused smile, producing a personal mentacum for Judith to examine.

"And the receiver simply fits about the head like earphones?"

"Like this," Krifjorl said. They were nearing Denver, and air traffic at their level had picked up, and the helio was proceeding more slowly so that Krifjorl's demonstration caused him to miss little of the tour.

He fitted the compact headpiece to his ears and flicked a small switch. It was suddenly bathed in a warm orange glow. "This way, the device functions as a limited range mentacum," he began. And then he flicked the switch again. "And now, as a teleprobe, you see, I could tell you, Lady Judith, just what—"

She flushed furiously, but Krifjorl had suddenly stopped speaking. His face had blanched, and a look of bewildered fury was suddenly in his eyes.

"Lieutenant! That air bus! There!" He pointed to a thick egg-shaped vehicle speeding to the north. "Tell your chauffeur to pursue it at once! It carries a full passenger-load of Earthwomen!"

For a moment Mason thought the Ithian was attempting some strange joke. But a look at the man's face told him that here was no joke, that here was something he was failing to understand.

"Earthwomen? Sure—"

"Plus two other beings, Lieutenant. Two others using Thrayxite probe screens!"

On Mason's order the government chauffeur swiftly hooked the helio about. "Those buses can make nearly a full Mach when they're wide open like that one," he told Krifjorl. "We can't overtake them, but maybe we can keep up. I'll have the chauffeur try for radio contact—"

"No, no! They'll be alert for any sign of awareness of their presence! Wait—"

The Ithian made a third adjustment on the mentacum, and it emitted a slight humming sound, and the orange glow vanished. "This will screen us for a short period, at least," he said. "And if we've not been already detected, perhaps we'll be able to follow. If you'll continue to help me, Lieutenant—"

"Looks as though they've got some of ours, doesn't it?" Mason said evenly. There

was a strange heat in his veins now, and with the Ithelian, his nervousness was somehow evaporated. "But how the devil—"

"They are clever, Lieutenant. We were somehow followed here even as we at first followed you in your Scout ship. We may have been probed before you were taken aboard our screened destroyer."

"But you said nothing about destroying slow breeders," Judith said above the throbbing roar of the helio's fast accelerating jets. "Why would they want—" and she let the sentence die, as comprehension snapped in her gray eyes. Her dark, slender eyebrows arched nearly together as she pushed the thought further.

The borderlands of Canada sped beneath them, and then there was pine forest, but the helio kept the fleeing bus in sight even as the shadows of a dying day crept incessantly from the east to engulf them. And then, abruptly, the bus had started down.

"They're hanging a neat frame on you, sir," Mason said. "Making certain you don't get the women you ask. By kidnaping some, they plan sure as hell to make it look as though Ithelian desperation is responsible. And bingo, your side's in the dog house in nothing flat. No deal!"

"They're damnably cunning," Krijvel said. "It will not be the first time they have come near making utter fools of us. I can't understand that."

"But how would they have gotten those women?" Judith asked. The helio was slanting downward, and was now less than five miles distant from the fast vanishing bus. It began to skim the tree tops of a great tract of spruce, its chauffeur swaying. Mason's signal to drop quickly out of their quarry's line of sight.

"Video ads, of course," Mason answered quickly, straining his tensed eyes to estimate distance in the fast gathering darkness. "Some big deal. Spaceflier business at twice the going rate of payment. Anything like that. . . ."

The bus finally vanished less than a half-mile ahead of Mason's helio, and there was a dark vertical shadow putting just above the tree tops. He knew it was one of their shuttle buses, and from its apparent size would easily hold all the bus would be able to carry—perhaps a full three hundred. He

gave orders quickly to the chauffeur, and then the helio was hovering inches above the tree tops, and he tossed a plastron ladder over the side.

"Don't use the radio," he snapped to Judith. "Just get back to New-UN headquarters. Inform them any way possible of what's going on, and then flash the air patrol and tell 'em to come gunning!"

He didn't give her a chance to argue. He simply swung over the helio's side, Krijvel after him, and within moments they were on the ground, and running with what silence they could through the darkness toward the towering Thraxite ship a quarter-mile distant.

"Their action is incomprehensible to me," the Ithelian grunted between gulps of air. "It violates the most basic tenets of the ancient Book of the Saints, sacred to us both—"

"Better save your breath for running," Mason told him, and they sprinted across the soft pine needle forest floor, shielding their eyes from treacherous, low hanging boughs, dodging the trees themselves as best they could in the moonlit darkness.

And they burst upon the clearing in which the Thraxite ship had landed almost before realizing it.

Mason caught a glimpse of Earthwomen, being led as though dragged into the yawning flank of the silent vessel.

There was a sudden movement in the darkness to his left, and he heard the start of an outcry on the Ithelian's lips. But it was all he heard or saw. There was a quick knife pain in his skull, and he crumpled to the ground.

III

"YOU may wait in here, sergeant," the New-UN orderly said. She was ushered into a small, comfortably appointed chamber adjoining the main conference hall, and the perfectly controlled coolness of her bearing was at its peak. To the casual glance of the orderly, perhaps, it flawlessly masked the vital convictions which had long settled within her and made her the little known woman she was. The studied mask itself had made her the efficient Space officer she was. And at the moment she was glad for it,

because it also concealed the anxious uncertainty that twined coldly inside her.

She was to wait, the Council had informed her. Wait, while the information she had given them was analyzed, digested. As though, perhaps, what she had said was part of some insidious plot; as though it were too fantastic to be the truth.

They had not even immediately authorized the dispatch of a patrol cruiser to the spot where she'd left Lance and Kallford over two hours ago, and by now—?

She tried not to think of what the Earthman and the Italian might be facing, alone and in the darkness. Nor of the conclusions to which the Council, called into emergency session by the President General himself when her information had been rapidly relayed through the correct channels to him, might arrive.

She could only wait.

And her waiting was terminated with an abrupt suddenness that made the twisting cold thing inside her a churning confusion. It had been only minutes, hardly minutes.

Only one of them came into the small room where she sat. She rose quickly to attention. It was an aide to the President General himself; a hovers-Colonel wearing the uniform of the World Police.

"Sergeant Kent," he said, "it is the Council's decision that you be placed under temporary arrest. Your case will be heard at the next sitting of the martial court to which your unit is assigned. If you will accompany me, please. . . ."

"May I ask, sir, what the charge against me is?" Her voice was steady by cultivated habit.

"You are to be held on suspicion of acting as accessory before and after the fact of conspiring to assist an alien power in the achievement of its objective within the governmental jurisdiction of Earth without official permission of the New United Nations."

"But the Italians have not done that, sir!" she protested. "It is a plot of their enemy, as I explained to the Council—"

"You will be given full benefit of due legal process, sergeant," the officer said. "You will come with me, please."

The Women's Detainment Barrack was not unpleasant, yet, Judith thought, it may

as well have been a medieval dungeon. But her own problem, she knew, was nothing beside the coming success of the Thargyites.

The call-buzzer at the side of her bunk interrupted her thoughts; it meant she was wanted in the main guard room. She straightened her uniform quickly, and within moments presented herself before the barrack warden.

Roger Cain stood beside the warden's desk. There was something white in his hand, and she knew what it was.

"You're at liberty, Sergeant Kent," the beefy-faced warden informed her in a tone as casual as though she'd asked her for a cigarette. "Warrant Officer Cain has posted a release voucher; you're coddled into his custody until your trial. That's all. You may go."

She left the barrack with Cain, wordlessly. None of it made sense. Unless—

"Well, don't I even get a thank you?" the red-haired giant asked.

"Yes, Mister Cain, sorry. But I don't understand—"

"Why I did it?" He chuckled, and she didn't like the sound of it. "I'm only too glad to have you in my custody, young woman! And, you know, you're not supposed to be out of my sight any—that is, any of the time!"

She felt her face redden, and spun about to face him. There was sudden anger at her lips and her coolness had evaporated.

"You contempt!"

"Easy there, sergeant! Always know there was a little more to you than that ice cube exterior of yours! But tell me—if you want to sit back there in that dump, or shall we stick our noses into the lovely minkup your precious Lieutenant Mason has set off?"

She stared up at him wordlessly, the blood hot at her cheeks. And she tried to think. This was Cain as she knew he was. This was Roger Cain, angling for a deal.

"I'm in your custody," she bit out. "I must stay within your sight. That is your responsibility."

He laughed at her, then gripped her elbow.

"Come on," he said. "I've got a B-1E waiting at the field. I think we should go on a little trip, sergeant. There are people I want to see!"

They were streaming for open Space within less than thirty minutes from the time Cain had freed her. She didn't ask him how he'd gotten permission for the fleet R-IX's use, or how he'd obtained her voucher, nor did she ask him how he had learned of what had happened to Lance and Krijord, yet she knew that somehow he was aware of the Thraxites and their plot. Cain had ways of learning the things he wanted to learn, getting the things he wanted to get.

"Keep an eye on the scanner for me, will you, beautiful?"

"Yes sir."

"And forget that sir stuff! Look, Judy—"

"For what do you want me to watch, sir?"

Cain granted, gave a shrug of his powerful shoulders and turned his attention back to the pursuit's compact control console.

Two hips, honey. Tearing hell-for-leather out of old Sol's little family. One'll be chasing the other, if my guess is any good. We want the front one.

"But—but that would be the—"

"The Thraxite crowd, right?"

For a moment she was silent. She knew he could not mean to attack; not with a day pursuit, swift as it was.

"Mister Cain, I can only guess at what you intend doing. But it will be my privilege in court to testify concerning your conduct of custodianship—"

"You must be working on the assumption that we're going back there, sweetheart!"

"You—"

"A deal is where you find it! Watch for that front hip, sergeant. With what we know of Krijord and his crowd, this oughta be a natural!"

THE cubicle in which he awoke was softly lit, and the painful throb Mason knew should be splitting his head apart was strangely absent. Krijord was bending over him, loosening the tightness of the military collar at his throat.

"They certainly were taking no chances with you," he said. His long Viking's hair was matted with blood just above the temple, yet he seemed to be suffering little pain, himself. "How do you feel?"

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"O.K. I guess. Don't feel anything, really. . . ." Krijord unbuckled the wide straps that held him solidly in an acceleration-hammock, and he sat up. The steel-walled room rocked for a moment, then steadied.

"The Thraxites are not vicious, any more than we. If they do not kill outright, they apparently take medical precaution to see that their victims suffer as little pain as possible. We're captives, however, together with your Earthwomen. We've been in flight for about an hour, putting us well out of your system, if we're hyperdriving—moving in what you term R-Space."

"Then—"

"Apparently no help of any kind arrived in time, Lieutenant."

Mason remembered, then. Judith. . . . Somehow she hadn't made it. Or hadn't made them believe her. This trip, he was strictly on his own. Not just a space weary Scout Lieutenant any more.

"What'll they do with us?"

"Pump us for information, probably. Kill me afterward. You should be safe enough in that respect. You're an alien, not a part of our conflict. Their labor planetoid for you, I would imagine. It is a jungle covered sphere at the edge of their planetary ring, our scouts have sighted it on numerous occasions. A handful of men in each of its camps, mining, probably, for the ore used in Thraxite engines. But it will be better than death."

"What are our chances, Krijord?" Mason felt the familiar nervousness returning to his wary body, yet this time it was in some way different. Not the kind that ate your insides out from too much Space, far too long.

"Of escape, you mean?" Mason nodded.

"There is no reason for you to risk—"

"Sure as hell is, friend. First because I believe you're my friend. Second, there were a couple of things you said awhile back that got me thinking. And third, I got myself shanghaied, and I don't think I'll like where I'm going!" Cain, Mason thought to himself, wasn't the only guy in the universe with a muscle!

The Thelian grinned. "We'll watch for a chance of some kind, then. But I will not let you risk your life. We of Ethelra obey the

Book, even if our enemy sees fit occasionally to violate the spirit in which it was conceived."

"Tell me something," Mason said. "This feud of yours. What's it all about? You mentioned that Book business once before, and it seems a people with your apparent piety and morality and general advancement would certainly find a way to arbitrate such a dispute. What are you fighting about?"

Krajor's answering smile was thin, and there was a pained look in his craggy features.

"We fight because the Book of the Saints says we must!" he answered at length. "And further than that—"

"Yes?"

"Further than that, I'm afraid we do not know!"

Mason felt his features twisting into an incredulous expression despite his efforts to resist and appreciate the wide gap of cultural differences between them.

"Don't know! But you can't fight a war without knowing why! You—"

"It is in the Book of the Saints," the Ithian said, "and, therefore, it is our command. And—" he looked into the Earthman's face with the slightest hint of a smile, "from what I've learned of Earth's history from your own lips, Lieutenant, what of your own past wars? Who among your own soldiery has really known why he fought?"

"Well, but—" And then Mason returned the smile. "No, it isn't so different, is it? But tell me more about this Book. Is it based on law, religion, ethics?"

And this time there was no smile on the Ithian's broad face.

"Legend says all three," he replied.

"Legend? And yet you blindly obey—"

"We always have. Its writings, such as we understand them to be, have governed us for millennia, Lieutenant. The Book is our way, our life. We are told we could not be a civilization without it."

Mason was silent for a long moment. He did not want to question too deeply the beliefs sacred to another, yet it was so damnablely peculiar. They fought bitterly, and they did not know why.

"Could you—would you let me see a copy of this Book, Krajor?"

"If I could I'd be glad to, Lieutenant. For I have often wished I could see the words it contains myself."

"You've never read it?"

"Never. Nor has any Ithian or Thrayx for thousands of years. There is, you must understand, only one Book of the Saints."

"Just one copy?"

"Yes. It has long been deemed sacrilege for mortal eyes to view the ancient writings. The single copy is kept in a great vault, built of indestructible metals, and protectively sheathed to last for all Time. The spot above its burial place is marked by a tall spire of stone. It is jealously protected."

"You said that its commands commit you and Thrayx to eternal battle. But if you could only read it, you might learn the basic cause of your conflict—and, knowing, certainly—"

"The thought has often occurred to me. But, there is even more prohibiting such an impossible undertaking than the powerful bondage of tradition and belief alone, Lieutenant. And that is the Book's very location."

"And that—?"

"The subterranean vault in which it rests is guarded in the Forest of Saarl. And the Forest of Saarl, my friend, is on Thrayx."

IV

"IT IS something completely beyond my understanding," the Ithian was saying. The two men stood, each flanked by two guards, at the threshold of a great ramp which led from the main air lock of the Thrayxite ship to the sodden surface of the speerport upon which it had landed but minutes before. Mason felt a chill of awed amazement, not because of the unexpected beauty of the verdant hills that rolled in a delicate blend of kaleidoscopic patterns on every side of the port and as far as the eye could see, nor was it even from the sight of the exquisite towers that rose as though from the heart of some fabled fairyland some miles to the south.

"They're all—all women!" Mason breathed. "Not a single man!" And he looked quickly to Krajor. "You mean you did not know this?"

"Know? By the teeth of Jharoul, we

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never so much as suspected, Lieutenant! We have not looked upon a Thrayxite face for five thousand years."

The guards spoke to them tersely in the common tongue of Ilkelos and Thrax, although peculiarly accented to Ilkelian ears, and Krijfoel gestured with a slight movement of his head to Mason. At a quick wave they started down the ramp.

"We're sunk, kid," Mason said. And he saw the heaviness in the great Viking's face. "We'll never make it out of here in a million years. Even if we made a betak for it; even if we had our hands free, where could we hide? Couldn't make a move. Two men among an entire female populace—"

He let the sentence trail off as he realized that Krijfoel wasn't hearing him. And as their brief view of Thrax was terminated by their entrance into a smaller shuttle-ship, he saw the hint of a smile flicker at the corners of the Ilkelian's lips.

Their captors strapped them into hammocks, and when they had gone to assist others in herding a portion of the Earthwomen aboard the same craft, Krijfoel finally spoke.

"I think for the moment their probes may be off us," he said quickly. "I was relieved of my own during my unconsciousness, so we're no longer screened. And the fact that we speak in your tongue does us little good. But hear me. If we are being taken where I hope we are, then they are playing into our hands almost as well as we could have asked. There will be a limited freedom there, and a chance, if we are clever enough, to get to a montacorn installation. A planetary unit of unlimited range."

"But among women?" Mason asked, and his throat was dry.

"That is the point," Krijfoel replied tersely. "We shall be among males almost exclusively, save for the Earthwomen and those Thrayxites who periodically will be sent to breed."

"You mean the planetoid that you talked of before . . . ? But I—"

"Think a moment! Thrayxite is a matriarchy, something we of Ilkelos never suspected. And therefore we erred further—what we believed to be a labor planetoid is not, of course!"

"Breeder!"

"Exactly. And if we can make it to one of their montacorns, perhaps our problem will be solved. Except that—" His voice hesitated, and Mason saw doubt in the sudden frown. "I—I have no right to sacrifice your life nor those of your women. If we were to get to a montacorn it would be to contact my people, to inform them of the planetoid's true nature, so that we may even the score for what was done to our own breeders, and perhaps even form a plan to take prisoners to replace them. But such a message would be intercepted, of course."

"Hell, we could dodge 'em long enough—"

"Perhaps we could, Lieutenant. But the ships I summon will be fighting their way through a tumbled Thrayxite guard—and once within range of our enemy's breeder satellite, they will have little time to seek us out and effect our rescue. Destruction will have to be immediate. Now do you understand?"

Mason wet his lips. He understood. Death for the breeders. For the Earthwomen. And for themselves.

"Nuts!" he dipped out. "That means that as far as you're going to be concerned, I'm just another Ilkelian private first class for awhile, not a space-neurotic Earthman! And our girls . . . well, I think—I think they'd prefer anything to the living death in store for them—the rotting away of their lives in some infested alien jungle. Anyway, somebody's got to be judge. So let's get this damned thing doped out!"

The Ilkelian began a reply, but the words were stopped in his throat by the sudden pressure of acceleration as powerful engines rumbled suddenly to throbbing life and lifted the Thrayxite craft quickly toward the eye of a great white sun.

FOR the second time in her life, Judith Kent watched the warp configurations of the Large Magellanic Cloud from the far side of the Rim; somehow it frightened her, as though some awful deadliness must lie within it.

Helplessly, she carried out Cain's orders, and as hopelessly, wondered of the fate of Lance and Krijfoel. Captives, with the

Barthwoman, in the Thrayxite ship with which Cain was so rapidly closing? Or lying dead somewhere, as she more than half believed, in the child wilds of northern Canada? The odds had been so great. She knew that to hope without reason was folly, and yet not to hope was no longer to care.

She twisted away quickly from Cain's muscular arm.

"What's eating you, duchess? Your conscience giving you trouble, or are you just plain scared?" When she didn't reply, he laughed shortly, and gestured toward the scanner. In it, the slender Thrayxite craft was growing steadily larger as Cain's swift pursuit gradually folded the gap of curved Space between them. "In a couple of minutes, we'll be ready to talk turkey, sweetheart. They ought to be aware of us right this minute, I think they'll listen to what we have to offer."

"To what you have to offer?"

He laughed again. "It's more than Mason ever had! You know, sometimes I think you were teaching for that space-happy has-been!"

She felt the burn of rising color in her cheeks and turned quickly away from him.

"You don't get it yet, do you duchess?" his heavy voice was saying behind her. "It's never occurred to you that there are other places to be beside with your own flock; that there are other men among whom to seek your fortune if the ones you were born among didn't offer the opportunities you expected. What are we among the stars at all for if it's not to find our destinies anywhere we think they might lie? What's this Big Freedom for, if not to use to some kind of advantage? And me, I'm sick of being a Warrant under worn-out space-neurotics like Mason! And I don't want to end up being one, either!"

Judith held her lips tight against the thing that surged hotly inside her. There would have to be a way to stop this man. And if there weren't—How the pampered friends whom she'd left so proudly to choose this calling would laugh at her, would say *"that was what the big-headed little rebel deserved . . . she had it coming if she couldn't act like a lady."* And they were wrong!

But this man was hideously twisting all

the things she had thought were good and right, worth hoping and striving for. All the priceless things that had stood for more than the soft, idle and pointlessly shallow existence to which she'd been born—

"But I guess you wouldn't get it," Cain was saying. "Been with a silver shovel in your mouth, you don't have to worry about sweating out your pit! Quit any time and there it all is after your little adventure, still waiting for you to come home to! Maybe they'll even want you to write a book! But me—my father wasn't a lucky g-prospecter."

A proximity alarm clanged, and Cain quickly turned his attention to the control banks. He jacked out the auto control and took over manually. And within seconds the pursuit was hovering over the great whale-like back of the Thrayxite craft, and then was drawn slowly to it as its powerful magnetics reached out, ensnared it. Then Cain cut the pursuit's drive, and they both waned.

The airlock opened, and the two women stepped through. There were weapons in their hands.

"I want to see your commander," Cain backed.

"I am the commander of this complement," the taller of the two said in an almost unaccented English. "You will consider yourselves my captives. Datch . . ."

"What? Not all women." There was a curious look on Cain's face; thoughts were racing behind the thin blades of his eyes.

"You are prisoners of the monarchy of Thrayx," the officer called Datch said. "If you do not resist, you shall be unharmed."

"All right, come off that alien-meets-alien stuff," Cain said as though the two briefly-uniformed women before him held toys rather than weapons in their hands. "I didn't just tag after you at a billion times the speed of light to get thrown into one of your dungeons! I've got some information I think you can use. And—" and the curious look was again on his face, "—there are some—shall we say—services, I think I can profitably perform for you."

"Profitably, Barthman? Profitable to whom?"

"To both of us. To me—that's why I'm here—and to you."

Judith's face was white. Perhaps this was some clever trick of Cain's. She could have been wrong.

"Tell me this information you have, Barthman."

"Let's slicker about price, first, Goldy-locks!" He stood there, confident, defiant, great muscles bunched beneath the fabric of his tunic.

"You, Barthman, are hardly in bargaining position!" Only the woman's mouth moved; her eyes bored straight into Cain's like fine diamond drills.

"Chuck me," Cain said with a grin, "and you chuck the best chance you've ever had to take your Thelian friends to the cleaners. What information I have concerning Thelian plans is one thing." Judith caught her breath. She knew Cain was lying now. Even Lance had learned little of the Thelian strategy, above Kriljor's attempt to enlist Earthwomen for Thelian breeding colonies. It was all, she realized suddenly, a colossal bluff, from which Cain planned to play his cards as he went along! And now he had found a wedge of some sort, some new bargaining point. There was still that curious look on his face, that cunning grin at his lips. "But what service I can render you," he was continuing, "is quite another! Ladies, how good are your teleprobe gadgets against an Thelian screen? A big blank, aren't they? But I still think you'd give those cute shirts of yours to find out what's going on inside the thick skulls of our Thelian friends."

A puzzled look flickered across the Thrayxite commander's face, yet she remained immobile, and her weapon held steady.

"First of all, bright eyes," Cain said swiftly, "may you be the first to know that they're all men! All men, get it?" There was a soft gasp from Dalek, and the commander's eyes flickered, widened almost imperceptibly. "And better yet, I'm a pal of Kriljor, their commander who picked us up just inside the Rim that time you followed us into Earth. So think it over. It ought to be worth a fancy little pile to you, ladies, since women agents would be kind of conspicuous in an all-male civilization!"

"You expect us to believe this fantasy? Do you expect us to accept your proposal

on the basis of nothing more than words? And the technique you describe, it has never been used, never even considered as a legitimate method of battle!"

Cain laughed easily. "Then maybe you better consider it if you want to come out on top! And as to the rest of it, if I was part of some counter-plot against you do you think I'd've gone to the trouble of bringing along some security?" And Judith felt something freeze inside her as he threw a careless glance in her direction. "There she is—Sergeant Judith Kent. Your hostage for this little operation! If I misbehave, she should make a pretty good bargaining point with Theos. From all I gather, they've got Earth sore enough at them as it is!"

There was an instant's silence, and then the commander said, "You have not proven your statement that our enemy is a male enemy."

"What do you think they wanted women for on Earth after you blasted that planetoid of theirs? A quibbling party or something? Add it up."

The quest in the small control bubble was electric. Judith watched the Thrayxites' faces as they weighed the incredible thing that Cain had said.

"I haven't got all eternity!" Cain snapped. "You think you can afford not to believe me?"

"Very well. Our Book has never mentioned this technique of spying, and therefore there can be no rule against it. As for the rest—that could be immaterial. You could be of value to us. Outline your plan."

"That's better, girls. Only take it just a little slower. We both know what we see, but let's haggle for awhile about the price, shall we?"

V

JUDITH shivered, partly from an uncontrollable terror and partly from the pre-dawn dampness creeping from the thick jungle surrounding the small clearing which held one of the breeder planetoid's many secluded colonies. The camp and the tangled growth which bounded it was her prison; a place in which there was freedom, yet where none were free. To walk or to run or to hide—but where? And so it was with

the rest—the hard-muscled, obviously drug-clouded males who had never known any other world than this, who never questioned from whence came the periodic groups of Thrayxite women for them to fertilize; who only gazed dully at her, dumbly understanding that she was to be, although captive here, left to herself and unmolested. Yet despite her status as hostage and Earth-woman, she was afraid.

The brute of a camp leader, Brubilla . . . Not dragged like the rest. There was more to his sidelong glances than curiosity and vague resentment. Too often, she could sense his eyes upon her. And she wondered at the increasing frequency of his visits to the camp's well guarded menzcom installation.

She had lost count of night and days under the white sun of Tlaxa and its ringed host. There had been two, perhaps, or three. Three days in which Roger Can had been doing what? Was he with Kaffiol and Lance posing as their friend, their fellow captive, listening to their plans against their Thrayxite captors . . . remembering? Or would they be tried, if indeed they still lived, in order that Can could, with them, learn even more of Ethean stratagems on a far greater scale?

And the Earth girls—she had heard the cries of some, the desperate cries of others.

Brubilla, entitled to use of the menzcom for daily contact reports with Thrayx as he was, was the only other alien being on the planetoid who could converse with her. He had lost little time in probing her to learn her tongue. And he had already hinted at the fate of the women from her planet. In other camps on the planetoid, held in small isolated groups, unmolested, Brubilla had said. Not prisoners, as was she.

Somehow, the Etheans would have to know.

For there was no Earth to which to turn now.

The shiver again shook her slender body, and her tattered uniform did little to shield her from this damp cold.

"Still one apart from the rest of us, are you?" The growl of Brubilla's voice behind her startled her, and she turned quickly to face the leech grins of derision on his thick lips.

"I am to be left to myself," she said with what assurance she could muster. "That is your order."

"I know my order, little one! No need to tell Brubilla his orders! But perhaps you will grow colder, perhaps you will grow hungry."

"You couldn't—"

"I have no order about feeding you, little one!"

Somehow she found the strength to voice her defiance. For she could still think. And thought, Lance had once told her, was the ultimate strength . . .

"You lie! There was such an order! But if you wish to bring the wrath of your masters down upon your ugly head." She watched his uncrumpled face, fainted the sudden pumlement she saw growing in his red, satanic eyes. If his intelligence were blazed enough by the self-made drug of his lust. "I myself heard such an order; and if you can prove me mistaken you may do with me what you will! God, would he stop to realize that she understood not a word of the Thrayxite tongue?"

"Quickly proven, my little one! Quickly enough proven! And then if what you say is untrue." He left the sentence miserably unfinished, and turned toward the sturdily-built cubicle that housed the colony's menzcom.

"Wait! I'll only believe your proof if I can hear it for myself!"

"Come along then and you shall hear it!" The thick lips slackened into a lascivious grin that sickened her, but she hastened to follow him. And he did not see her as she scooped the jagged stone from the ground, thrust it into a tattered tool-pocket of her uniform.

Past the quiescent, sweet rooking bodies of the bull-muscled guards, into the dimly lit chamber beyond, Brubilla half walking, half shambling before her.

She watched him as he switched the device into life; waited until its dull orange glow assured that it was ready for use. So much like the communications room of an ordinary ship of Earth, she thought. So like the familiar things of her life, yet so alien.

He had barely slipped the menzcom's headpiece on his skull and adjusted a

simply calibrated control dial when she struck him at the base of his thick neck with the stone, all the force of her supple young body behind it.

Blood spouted as its ragged edges tore through flesh, bone and nerves, and slowly, Brashla crumpled from the rade chair that held his dying body.

Thought images as well as words, Krijor had explained during their flight so long ago in the helio. Language would be no barrier. Over the head, like this . . . and this switch—

She twisted the large dial from its setting, watched a slender thread of light within a transparent sphere above it fluctuate in breadth as the dial twisted. And when it was at its widest, she gambled that it indicated the broadest transmitting beam of which the mentacorn was capable.

And then she marshalled her thoughts, carefully chose the simplest words.

Warning, Ubelon! There is an Earthman among you at work as a spy for Thraxx! I am a captive.

Over and over, the same words, the same thought images which they formed; of Cain, of this hell-planetoid itself.

The orange glow pulsed as though it itself awoke with the desperation of her signal. And she heard the guard barely in time.

A howl of rage bellowed from him as she turned, twisted frantically just outside his grasp, darted headlong through the door.

And she was quicker than those outside; she was beyond them, running, the breath sobbing in her throat.

Away from the blood-soaked thing she'd left crumpled in death behind her, and toward the jungle's edge. Toward some new horror, perhaps, and toward a freedom that would be short-lived at best. For she had killed Brashla, and she knew they would not stop now until she had been run to earth.

THREE men watched as the six ships landed in the jungle clearing; emptied of the selected Thraynic women who would in little more than a day's time re-enter them, the breeders' seed within their bodies, for the journey back to the mother planet.

It had been the same the day before, and the day before that, and in the distance, they

had watched similar craft descend toward other of the many colonies with which the lush planetoid was dotted.

"Nuts!" Cain said. He turned to Mason. "What the hell else is there to do? Sit here and rot? They won't kill us. They'll just let Naster take his course—"

"There's more to be done than simply make a run for it to one of their ships," Mason snapped. "The mentacorns on them, Krijor's said a dozen times, haven't the necessary range."

"So what's your plan? Or don't I get to hear any of the details?"

Mason studied the big man's face. Captured in his attempt to rescue the Earthwomen, he had said. His explanation had been that simple. New-UN hadn't believed Judith, but she had convinced him, and so he'd tried on his own responsibility, and simply hadn't made it. And then they'd brought him here, scarcely hours after Mason and Krijor had themselves been delivered to the searing colony.

Logical enough, yes. Cain was the kind who would try such a crazy stunt, alone, with such supreme overconfidence in his own muscle power. Yes—

"We must not be impatient," Krijor interrupted his thought. He stood up, his blond head nearly touching the top of the plastiflex tent. "We must be certain and wait for the best time, Mister Cain. For if we fail in our first attempt, there will not be a second. And it has only been three days. As yet, we have been left quite to ourselves; even my life has not been threatened."

Mason noticed the puzzled frown that was across the Indian's forehead. "Do you think—"

"I cannot even guess the reason for that," Krijor murmured, as though more to himself than in answer to Mason's question. "By all the rules of our conflict, I should be stretched naked for the jungle beasts by now."

"Forget it!" Cain broke in quickly. "You're alive now, and if we can have a little action around here maybe you'll stay that way. We've watched long enough. They don't guard those ships at all. Those breeders they keep dragged to the eyes, so why should they? I say we just grab one and

blast off! Unless somebody's got a better plan, and I still haven't heard one—"

"Awfully anxious, aren't you, Mister Cain?" Mason asked.

"I'm not afraid of 'em if that's what you mean!"

Lance turned to Kriffoel. "Maybe he's right. We've watched for three days. What do you think?"

The Ithlian looked out across the colony of low, square-shaped enclosures and to its far side where the twisted jungle began; to the spot where the menstcom was housed in a squat, guarded dome of crudely-shaped steel. Then he turned back to the Barthman, and Mason saw the uncertainty in his eyes.

"We have gained far less than I had hoped by watching," he said slowly. "We have learned the number of their guards, and the period of their change, but perhaps that is all we shall learn. If you think that as soon as there is darkness—"

"About time!" Cain said sourly. "And it'll be straight for the—"

"To the menstcom first," Mason said quietly. "And after that, to the ships if we can, Mister Cain." He felt strangely calm as his eyes met Cain's squarely. Somewhere within him, there was something changing. "Take it from an ex-has-been, big man! That's how it's going to be!"

THE camp was dark and silent as the three men left the tent. They walked as if from boredom, changing direction often as though at random, yet they moved with a deceiving swiftness, and each step brought them closer to the crude dome. The sound of their movements was as a whisper that lost itself with the quiet murmur of the night wind through the web of the jungle, and when they were close enough, they halted, to wait, to watch.

There was the soft clink of metal on metal and the muffled of dead-toned voices as the guard changed. Four hulking shapes walked at last in a tired shamble from the structure housing the menstcom. Four others prepared to take their posts.

And there was little to disturb the silence after that.

A muffled grunt, a choked off curse lost in a brief rustle of undergrowth as though a sudden breeze had momentarily ruffled its

languid calm. And that was all.

Four breeders lay dead outside the dome.

Mason felt the warm stickiness of blood on his face, and the sting of a deep cut somewhere upon it. He saw that Cain was straightening over a mangled form; that Kriffoel had overcome odds of two to one. The breeder at his own feet had died swiftly of a deftly broken neck, a reddened disk still clutched in his suffering fingers.

Then they were inside the dome, and Kriffoel was placing the head-unit of the menstcom over his matted yellow hair.

Mason watched in the half-light of the pulsing orange glow, listened to the heaviness of Cain's breathing.

And he saw Kriffoel's face stiffen suddenly. With a swift movement the Ithlian had handed him the head-unit, and with slippery fingers he fumbled the device into place over his own head.

Before he could think he had given Cain all the warning that he had needed.

"My God, it's Judith! Somehow she's—"

Kriffoel lunged too late. The man whom Judith's menstcom message had branded as a spy was already through the dome's door, running.

Mason moved more quickly than the Ithlian then. Ahead in the jungle there was a crashing sound, and Mason tripped suddenly himself as he ran, fell. Kriffoel leapt past him in the darkness, as though he could somehow see through it, and then Mason had regained his feet and was following blindly.

And suddenly he thought of the empty ships behind them, and Cain's abrupt uselessness to his Thryene employers. Then—

But the gamble was too great. Cain might not double back, but instead plunge headlong further and further into the concealing mazes before him. No, Cain would not double back. Not now. For in Kriffoel he had met an even match, and now he was afraid!

Fully an hour had passed when, his tank torn and the exposed flesh bleeding, Mason caught up with Kriffoel.

"He was nearly within my hands for a moment—" the giant whispered hoarsely. He breathed with difficulty, and there were long slashes gleaming redly in the darkness across his great muscles.

Mason stood silently for moments, trying with a thought that nagged insistently at the edge of his brain. He knew Cain. He knew the man.

Then suddenly his thoughts were interrupted by the muffled sound of a rocket blast, and within moments there was a vertical trail of fire above them as a Thrayite ship hurtled skyward.

"By Jove!—"

"No!" Mason exclaimed. "The blast was from in front of us, he didn't double back! Must be another colony near our own, and he stumbled out of this overgrown mess and right into it. There was simply an empty ship—"

"Then the traitor has won!" Krijori's face was tilted upward, and in the faint glow of the planetesimal belt that girdled Thrax, it seemed more than ever that of an heroic Viking king of ages gone.

"There's a chance he hasn't!" Mason breathed. He had the thought now, pinned down, clear in his head. "If there has been no alarm back at our own camp we may still have the mentacorn to ourselves. We'll signal him as you planned and then—then there is something else you will say. Something else that I think will, as the saying goes on Earth, kill two birds with a single blast."

Mason had lost track of time; perhaps it was as many as two hours before they had fought their way through the clinging undergrowth back to the mentacorn at the fringe of their own camp. Several times they had had to stop, for there had been sounds in the jungle other than those they had made themselves. Animals, Krijori had said, who had got the scent of their blood, but the noises had not been fast and crashing—more those of stealth, as were those of their own steps. A single animal, perhaps, with the scent of their blood; or that of the broader guard they had slain. And stifling.

The dome was still silent, and the stiff corpses outside it lay undisturbed in the thick undergrowth. In the clearing the six empty Thrayite ships towered in the deepening quiet, star-dome glinting faintly from their polished hulls.

Wordlessly, they entered the dome, and it was as they had left it.

Krijori again adjusted the headset, and the orange glow pulsed and waned as Mason watched.

And then at length, "If they are to know, they know now," Krijori said. "And the Thrayite host as well. What was there you wished to add, Lieutenant?"

Mason spoke quickly. "Say that you have discovered that the priceless—and you must say priceless—Book of the Saints is in the Forge of Steel on Thrax. Say that we have discovered it to be less well protected than is generally believed. Then give the location of the subterranean vault as precisely as you can!"

"But my people are well aware—"

"I realize that, but our friend Cain doesn't!"

The Ithlian's face was still puzzled, but he projected the thought message Mason had dictated.

And then in seconds the Ithlian had hastily but thoroughly wrecked the mentacorn, and the two men left its silent dome for the empty ships that beckoned so tantalizingly a scant quarter-mile distant.

They had run perhaps a dozen steps when the undergrowth behind them ripped and tore, and Mason spun.

There was a muffled cry, and he had barely time to catch Judith's bleeding body as she fell in exhaustion into his arms.

VI

THE muscles in his arms and legs trembled with fatigue as he lifted the semi-conscious girl up to Krijori, and then with what seemed an impossible effort, hauled himself through the deserted ship's stern airlock.

The Ithlian seemed to carry Judith as though she were a feather as he climbed the narrow ladder above Mason, infinitely upward, the Earthman thought . . . an infinite distance to the ship's forechill, to its control banks.

There was only the sound of his own hoarse breathing in his ears as he climbed, rung after rung, and the hollow echo of Krijori's boots as they mounted resolutely above him.

Then they had made it, and were strapping Judith into a hammock, were taking

their own shock-seats before the control-banks of the Thraynite shuttle-craft.

The Indian did not hesitate. His fingers deliberated for only a moment above the firing studs in the blue-green glow of the banks, and then they flicked home, and engines mottled, roared into terrifying life.

Within moments, saying nothing, moving the swift, silent movements of desperation, they had freed themselves of the grasping snare of the jungle beneath them; were once more strong, liberated things in the vast freedom of Space.

"And now Ithelos!" Krijoorl cried as they broke swiftly from the orbit of the great spangled ring of Thrayx. "If we can but escape their fleet. Any moment they should be on the scanner, forming to meet the onslaught of Ithelan squadrons—"

"No!" Mason said, and his voice was like a solid thing clogging his throat. "No, not Ithelos—not yet!" His eyes burned, and the red welts that covered his body had begun to sting, to pain, and it was hard to think.

He saw the frown forming on Krijoorl's face.

"Thrayx, and the Forest of Saarl," he bit between teeth clenched against the creeping agony in him. "The Book of the Saints, Krijoorl. It is the key, don't you see. Key to all this, your friend."

For an instant the Indian said nothing, but groped in hidden pockets of his battered space harness. His long fingers quickly produced a tablet, thrust it into Mason's hand. The Earthman swallowed it and almost at once energy coursed as though from some hidden well in his body through his flagging muscles and nerves.

Then Krijoorl spoke. "I do not understand, Lieutenant. I know only that it would be almost certain death. Intension near the rank would bring a flight of guard ships within minutes."

"I know that," Mason said. "But perhaps not down upon us! And we must have that Book. I've been thinking about it, comparing it with similar writings in Earth's own past. Such books are not new, such motives, such methods. Your Book is priceless in a way that even you don't know, Krijoorl. I'm certain of it. For it must contain the reason that you fight."

"And that reason?"

"A reason, if I'm right, that would end your feud once and for all. A nasty bit of logic which the people of Ithelos and Thrayx were quite deliberately kept from knowing from the beginning. I'd make book on it that at one time both planets were very hungry places—"

"But if you are wrong, Lieutenant?"

Mason fastened his gaze straight before him on the diamond-studded scanner, and saw that some of the smaller diamonds were moving in a tiny echelon.

"Then I guess we die young," he answered the Indian. "Want to try?"

The Indian's face loosened into a wry smile. "Sometimes you ask rather foolish questions, Lieutenant! I've been bred to such business, and not given my life so much thought before that! But—"

"Yes, Judith."

And then they heard a woman's voice speaking behind them. "Thraynite condensation hammocks could stand improvement," it said. "And when we leave the Forest of Saarl, I think I'll just lie on the deck instead."

KRIJOOPL'S knowledge of the spot's location in the great forest was far more accurate than he had given Mason reason to hope. And with a deftness that matched that with which he had eluded the screens of the Thraynite fleet hurtling to protect its broader phinetoid, he brought the ship to rest at Mason's direction, little more than a quarter-mile from where the Book of the Saints lay entombed.

It was marked by two spires. One was of brown stone, as Krijoorl had said, immobile, with ancient symbols carved from its base to its pinnacle.

And the other was smooth, and of metal, its gaping airlock testimony to the haste with which it had been landed, unbidden by the natural camouflage of the soaring trees with which the grass-carpeted clearing was surrounded.

"Who—"

"Mushes," Mason answered her. The three were crouched at the clearing's edge, waiting. "Thought he'd made it some way. Must've ducked in before their fleet got into Space. Gambling that our signal that he picked up wouldn't bring out a special re-

ception committee ready and waiting to meet him."

"But he has preceded us by many minutes," Krijfjor said. "I do not see—"

"Not so many. He was in flight two full hours before you mentioned Ithos. And if I know him, it was straight out of this galaxy at full blast! So he had to back-track all that time and distance. He had to risk a trap down here, as well as the Thrayite fleet which he knew would be rushing to protect its breeders."

"You had counted on those factors, Lieutenant?"

"Two birds with one blast, like I told you before," Mason said. "Ask Judith, here. She'll tell you how well I know him." The girl was silent, but her eyes worked her thoughts more eloquently than her tongue might have.

"Some will do anything to obtain the 'priceless'—" Krijfjor said softly.

"Can, any time?"

"You have laid a clever trap, Lieutenant."

"If it springs, sure. But where are those guard ships you were so worried about? I was counting on them, too. They should be all over the place by now."

And he was interrupted by the high pitched scream of the flat, saucer shapes that hurtled suddenly over the tree tops, dotted, slid quickly downward.

"FLAT!" Mason yelled. And as they stretched prone, they saw Cain running toward the ship from a great open shaft in the ground, a round, shiny thing beneath one arm.

A probing needle of white hot flame stabbed out from one of the descending ships, and there was a scream, and then Cain fell, a charred skeleton, to the ground. The shiny thing he had carried rolled lazily along the grass, textured on edge, plopped silently over.

Mason was poised like a runner awaiting the starting gun. For a split second he hesitated as the guard ships touched down, their weapons momentarily screened by the lush foliage at the clearing's edge.

And then Mason was running. Judith and Krijfjor only steps behind him.

There were perhaps screams before the armed women of the Thrayite guard detail would break from the forest's edge.

He stumbled, fell, and his outstretched hands touched the round, shiny thing, and he could smell the rock of Cain's smoldering skeleton.

Krijfjor and Judith hesitated.

"Damn it, run!" and he felt his scream tear at his dry throat, and then clutched the metal disk to him and regained his feet in a single whip-like motion, and halted after them toward the gaping air lock of the ship that Cain had never reached.

There was a hissing sound and a wave of heat crackled behind him, seared his flesh beneath his tattered tunic. And there was another, inches before him, swooning smoking stars in the soft green turf, and shouted orders filled the air scant yards behind him.

Then somehow he was at the air lock, and strong hands were pulling him over its edge, and it swung to, glowed red as a bolt of raw energy spent itself harmlessly against it.

"Now Ithos!" Mason said as he fought for new breath.

IT WAS white, all white around him.

He tried to sit up but there was the touch of gentle hands that stayed him, lowered him back upon the bed.

There were two of them—tall, like Vikings, and memory returned slowly. There was a smaller one, too, standing straight and erect beside him, like a proud queen from the pages of Earth's colorful history.

Judith. And Krijfjor. And another. And in his hands there was the silver disk. The can.

The can of records. The Book of the Saints.

He tried again to straighten, and then heard the voice of the one whom he did not know.

"I am Ythrevok, Grand Liege of Ithos," the voice said. "And I hold in my hands, Earthman, the Book of the Saints. I have read it, and I have broadcast to all of Thrayx what I have read. A true delegation has already departed from that planet to meet us here in Space."

"But—" the word stuck in his throat, and it was hard to think

"Commander Krijool said that you suspected it was the key to our great trouble. You were right.

"For it tells of a conference among the leaders of our two worlds many millennia ago, a conference held in secret, because of the nature of its subject—the very people of our worlds themselves. Secret, because of the decision concerning them and their staggering number. Too staggering for either planet any longer to feed. And the record itself was then committed to this single microtape, and itself, kept in secrecy since the day it was recorded.

"At first shrouded in deliberate mysticism, it was at length remembered only as the Last Word of the Saints in the sudden wars which so quickly followed its creation, the true cause of which was skillfully falsified to the people of the time, and truly known only to those who made the microtape I hold here.

"They were our greatest leaders; in them was invested the responsibility for the welfare and livelihood of our two planets, both materially and spiritually.

"When they lived, those records say, travel in Space beyond the speed of light had not been accomplished; they believed such a feat an impossibility imposed by a condescending Nature that could be challenged too far. And they therefore knew no way of reaching beyond the planets of Helos and Thrayx for the food and resources that became so sorely depleted as both planets became, at length, stripped nearly bare as their populations swelled beyond saturation point.

"Medical science had permitted the old to grow older; granted the new-born an almost certain purchase on life once first breath had been drawn. Yet its greatest offering was rejected by the people; there were indignant cries at the mere suggestion that they intelligently regulate their number, so that their poverty might live in greater plenty than had they.

"There was but one solution for our desperate leaders. For although warfare had long since vanished from our civilization as it had matured, it took with it Nature's

own unpleasant balance for her overgenerous fecundity.

"The new balance, then, had to be of Man's making. And so it was made.

"Our leaders, our Saints, as we have come through the years to know them, were of cosmic adept masters at the many subtle arts of propaganda, and they used those arts to the very limits of their skill. They deliberately fomented, as their ancient record shows, the wars, small at first and then ever larger, between Helos and Thrayx.

"They could not have foreseen that one day there would be conflict for existence between the sexes; logically calculating intellect against intuitive, wily cunning in a battle to determine the most fit, who would then enjoy the right to survive.

"Nor could they have foreseen that one day, because of the very conflict they fomented, the science of controlled genetics would at last be recognized as a necessity of survival to both factions.

"Today we have our answer to the age old problem of keeping our consumption within the limits of our ability to produce for it; we have used it to survive. But to survive war, not peace.

"And that, as you apparently suspected, Earthman, is the key.

"We know now why we fought. And with the knowledge of the life forces with which we insured our continued existence during our years of battle, we may now become united worlds of peace again. For we shall use that knowledge to take more advantage of Nature's fruits than we took before.

"Well done, Earthmen. And with our thanks, know that we shall be always in your debt."

Then Yharvak bowed low, and left just the three of them together in the white hospital bay of his flagship.

Krijool was smiling, and there was a shyness in Judith's eyes.

Mason grinned. "I hope those Thrayxite babies get a wiggle on," he said. "Those Earth gals gotta get 'em home! Their mothers'll be frantic. Hey, girl, not in front of company!"

Narakan Rifles, About Face!

By JAN SMITH

Those crazy, sloppy, frog-like Narakans . . . all thumbs and six-inch skulls . . . relics of the Suzi swamps. Until four-fisted Lt. Terrence O'Mara moved among them—lethal, dangerous, with a steady purpose flaming in his volcanic eyes.

TERRENCE O'MARA lay flat on his back trying to keep his big body as still as possible. Despite the fact that he was stripped to his regulation shorts, a large pool of sweat had formed on the cot underneath him. The only movement he permitted himself was an occasional pursing of his lips as he dragged on a cigarette and sent a wisp of smoke upward through the heavy humid air. Then he would just lie there watching as the smoke crept up to mingle with the large drops of

water that were forming on the concrete of the command post.

"Damn! Damn Naraka, anyway! Outpost of civilization! Who'd want the blasted place except the Rums?"

At the words, Terrence moved his head just a fraction of an inch and his eyes only a little farther to look across the room to where Bill Fielding was twisting and turning on his cot. All he could see of the other man was the wet outline of his body under a once white sheet and a hand that every





so often reached into a bucket of water on the floor and then replaced a soaking T-shirt over a red head.

"You'll feel it less if you lie still," Terrence said, distressed at the necessity for talking.

"Feel it less! My God, listen to the man! What difference does it make if you lie still or move around or even run around in the suns like a bloody Greenback? Dust Bin will get you one way or another . . . and if it doesn't, the Rumi will."

The visible hand lifted the T-shirt and began to pop salt tablets into an open mouth like they were so many peppermints.

"I wonder where Norton is. Out reviewing the troops?"

"Reviewing, my eye. He's up at Government House sitting in that cool living room drinking one of Mrs. Wilson's ky drinks and admiring Mrs. Wilson's shapely legs. From a discreet distance, of course. Being temporary Commanding Officer of even Dust Bin has its privileges!"

There was a rattle of drums and the blare of one or two off-key instruments from outside.

"Then why," asked Terrence, "are those poor beggars marching up and down in this blasted heat?"

"The Greenbacks? They love it! It would take more than a little heat to get under these inch-thick skins of theirs. They like to play soldier when it's a hundred and thirty under water."

There were a few more straggling notes and then the subsidence of a march began.

"Listen to that, will you?" Fielding moaned. "They can't even keep time with a drum! They can't march, they can't shoot, they can't break down a Bannang; they're all thumbs and six-inch thick skulls. Train local forces to take over! Bah! Did those desk jockeys back in New Chicago ever see a Greenback? Did they ever try to teach a Nardkan to fix a bayonet to the proper end of a rifle or to fire a blaster in the right direction?"

TERRENCE was lighting another cigarette with as little exertion as possible. "Yes, but they keep trying. Ten hours a day. You don't have to drive those boys. They

want to learn. Listen to O'Shaughnessy barking out orders."

"Sergeant Major O'Shaughnessy of the First Nardkan Rifle!" Fielding murmured sarcastically. "A year ago he was squatting in a mud cocoon at the bottom of Son's swamp with the rest of the frogs. Now he's got a good Irish name and he's strutting around like a Martian Field Marshal."

"I thought the names might give them a sense of self respect. Besides we couldn't pronounce them and I was tired of hearing Norton yell 'Hey, greenboy!' at them."

"Well, they picked the right guy when they made you Training Officer. You and those damn frogs get along like you came from the same county!"

"They aren't any great shakes for brains but you can't take anything away from me boys for willingness."

"Willingness! Hoorny! They're willing, so what? So is a Son Swamp Band. What'll it get them? A week after they pull the Terran forces out, the Rumi will gobble up the lot of them. Maybe they'll gobble them and as before we pull out. Who could fight in this place? Who'd want to fight? I say, to hell with Nardkan! It's so near to hell already with those two blasted suns blazing sixteen hours a day. Let the Rumi have the stinking planet! Let them have the whole Centaurian System!"

"Speaking of pulling out, I wouldn't be surprised if Dust Bin wasn't the next place we let go of . . ."

Fielding raised himself on one elbow. "No kidding? Where did you hear that?" His sunburned and blistered face was alight with excitement.

"Well, you know how it's been. When we first came here twenty years back, we drove the Rumi out of all this country and more or less took their cat feet off the Nardkan's backs but now that so much of the Earth garnet has been pulled all the way back into the Solar System, the Rumi are acting up again. So much so that the dope I got is that we may be pulling everything back into the Little Texas peninsula to wait for reinforcements and it will take four years for those to come out from Mars."

"Great! Great! But . . . Ah, it's too good to be true. Can't you just picture Fielding and O'Mara parading down Dobi street in

New Chicago with their best lieutenant bars on their collars? Say, you don't suppose that's why the *Saw Maid* is sticking around out here, do you? Imagine, free transportation! A two hour trip to New Chi!"

"I'd sure hate to march those two hundred miles at this time of year!"

"March? Through those swamps? Every time we run a patrol through them . . ."

Fielding was interrupted by a knock on the door and a skinny young Terran with sergeant's chevrons on his shorts stuck his head through from the other room and said, "Major Chapelle's on the voice radio, sir. He's culling from battalion headquarters and wants Captain Norton."

"Tell him Norton's up playing footbles with the Resident's wife," Fielding said, "You'd think those people down at the river would have enough to do without bothering us in the heat of the day, wouldn't you?"

The sergeant looked shocked and started to withdraw his head. Terrence frowned Fielding into silence and called to the sergeant, "Just a minute, Rogers, I'll talk to the Major."

Major Chapelle was a thickset, balding man in his late forties. Even the blazing suns of Naraka hadn't succeeded in burning the sickly yellow color off his face. In the vision screen he looked like a man on his last legs. Whatever was wrong with him didn't help his temper. Terrence thought as he lowered himself gently into a seat before the screen,

"O'Mara! Where in hell is Norton?" he demanded.

"Well, sir, you see . . ." began Terrence.

"Never mind! I've a pretty good idea where he is. A fine time to be chasing skirts! Well, get this straight, O'Mara. Orders have come through and we're pulling the battalions out. We're ordered back to Little Texas. We're going to give up these positions along the river tonight and pull back into Dust Bin. The *Saw Maid* will stand by to evacuate us. You people are to come too. Everybody has to get out, both the military and civilians. All hell's broken loose down river. The Rumi are across the Muddy in half a dozen places. They've cut the 3th to pieces. New Chicago thinks that those cuts have been bringing troops in from space all along, despite the agreement by

both sides not to do so. And now they have us way outnumbered." The Major's voice held a thin edge of hysteria.

"Is there any action along our front, Major?" Terrence asked quickly, hoping to stop the flow of talk before Chapelle's hysteria communicated itself to the enlisted men who were sitting or lying about the command post.

"Not yet; just patrols across the river so far. We've got to get out, O'Mara, and get out fast. They'll be all over us if we don't. The Colonel says for Norton to have everything ready to go. He wants the depot destroyed, everything's got to go, everything we can't take along. The *Saw Maid* won't have time for more than one trip. He wants the HQ company and the civilians on board by tomorrow morning at the latest."

"What about the Rifles, sir?"

"What? The what?"

"The native troops, sir. The Narakan Rifles." Terrence smiled.

"The Rifles? Good God, man! We haven't time for nonsense. The Rifles are only Greenbacks, aren't they? You get Norton started burning those assets."

Terrence put down the microphone very carefully to keep from slamming it down and stalked back into his quarters. Angrily he began to take his radiation clothing from its hooks on the wall.

"What the devil is eating you?" demanded Bill Fielding.

"We're pulling out, lock, stock and barrel," Terrence told him.

"Pulling out? Whowee! I know Mrs. Fielding didn't raise her boy to be a feign' egg. Goodbye, Dust Bin! Hello, New Chi!" Bill was up on his hands and knees pounding on his cot. "But what's the matter with you? You like this place?"

"They're leaving the Rifles," Terrence said, zipping up his protective coveralls as he left the room.

II

STEPPING outside on Naraka with the full power of Alpha and Beta Centauri beating down was like stepping into a river of fire. Even with the cooling unit in his suit, Terrence was aware of the searing heat that filled the parade ground. Looking off

across the makeshift native huts, he could see the bright sides of a huge space ship-like object. The big dirigible *Jan Maci* was lying in an open field. It's a funny world, he thought to himself, where you have to use dirigibles for planetary travel. But a dirigible was the only practical aircraft when you had to use steam turbine engines because of the lack of gasoline and the economic impracticability of transporting it in the limited cargo holds of the occasional spacers that came out from Sol.

The Narskan Rifles were marching toward him now, the band doing absolutely nothing but *The Wearing of the Green*. Three hundred big, green bodied, beady eyed, frog-like creatures were marching in the beating beat with their non-words croaking out orders in English which might have come out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

As they marched by him, he snapped a salute. Watching them closely he tried to find two men who were in step with each other or one man who had his rifle at the right angle. Unable to find either, he stood there conscious of failure, failure which went beyond mere military precision however. Sloppiness at review could have been overlooked if he had been able to find that the Narskans had any ability as fighting men but after a year of training they seemed almost as hopeless as they had at first. It wasn't that they were completely unintelligent. In fact, other than the Galactic traveling Rumi, they were the only extra-solar race of intelligent beings encountered by man so far. It was just, he thought, that the hundreds of years during which the Rumi had dominated their planet had reduced the Narskans to a state of almost complete ineptitude.

He stood there as they passed in review three times because he knew that his presence pleased and encouraged them. Then he turned, and with dragging feet made his way down Dust Bin's single street toward Government House.

In a few minutes he was standing in the cool, air conditioned living room of the Wilsons. Wilson was seated at his desk rummaging through some papers while Norris and Mrs. Wilson were lounging in comfort chairs admiring each other over tall, frosty drinks.

They took the news just as he expected them to. Wilson ran his hand through his sparse, gray hair and murmured something about it being a shame to have to leave the natives on their own after having more or less dragged them out of their comfortable swamps. A glance from his wife silenced him.

"What the hell," Norris said, "they're only blasted thick wined Geckenbacks."

Mrs. Wilson yawned, "It'll be something of a bother packing but it'll certainly be a pleasure to get back to New Chicago. Some women's husbands get good posts in half-way civilized parts of the Universe. I don't know why I should always have to be stuck in every backwater, hick town there is."

Wilson smiled apologetically, "Now, dear . . ." he began but was interrupted by the sudden ringing of the telephone on the table near Norris' chair.

"Get that, will you, O'Mam?" the captain said, making no attempt to reach for it, "It's probably the Command Post."

Terrence put the phone to his ear angrily and growled into it. An excited Bill Fielding was on the line. "Terry? Is that you? Fielding here. Hell's breaking loose. There's a bunch of blasted Rumi trying to force their way into town. They attacked the sentries down this way and may be heading for your end of town too."

Terrence dropped the phone and headed for the door. "Rumi!" he shouted and there were shouts and cries from outside in answer. Then he heard the clack, clack, clack of Rumi spring guns. Windows of the room crashed in and Wilson collapsed across his desk. Norton grabbed Mrs. Wilson and pulled her down onto the floor. Terrence dropped to his hands and knees and continued toward the door as he drew his forty-five.

SOMEWHERE, someone had cut loose with a Banning and its high whine drowned out the clack of the spring guns. With a quick look around, Terrence started at a run for the next building which was the native schoolhouse. He didn't make it. There was a clack, clack from off to his left and he threw himself forward, sliding and sliding in the dust and gravel of the street. A warehouse across the square was

on fire and three Rumi had darted from behind it. In one brief glance he saw those long barreled spring guns of theirs and the tall, graceful bodies and the feline faces under the plastic protective clothing.

He snapped four shots at them and saw one fall. Then he began to slither along the ground raising enough dust to mask his movements. There were half a dozen of them in the square when he reached the rear door of the schoolhouse. Several gleaming plastic bolts crashed into the wooden outer door a second after he had raised up to open it and then had dropped back down.

Norton fired from the residency and momentarily scattered the Rumi and Terrence was inside the school room and racing for the side window from which he could get a clear line of fire at the raiders. He had a brief glimpse of Joan Allen, the school teacher, standing in a corner of the room with the tiny green figures of native children huddled around her. Then he was at a window and had beaten out the heavy protective glass and was firing into a mass of the cutmen, firing and cursing as his gun cracked. He cursed in a stream of Marlan, English and Greenback profanity as he forced another clip into the gun.

"Lieutenant O'Mara, if you'll be so kind as to restrain your language in front of these children," a voice said from over his shoulder.

Terrence reached back and felt something soft and forced it over against the wall out of the line of the window. Then he risked a quick look which was almost his last. A spring gun bolt bit into a groove in the window sill next to his head and smashed into the blackboard across the room.

"Lieutenant O'Mara, would you mind telling me what this is all about?" came the same calm determined woman's voice from beside him. He fired again at a darting figure across the square and saw it shamble before he had to drop to his haunches as the window above him was smashed and shattered by bolts and glass rained down about his head.

He put another clip into his gun and cursed because he had only two left. He turned his head briefly and had a quick glimpse of a white face framed in straight

dark hair and a small, neat figure in a yellow dress.

"Rumi attack. One of their patrols must have gotten around the battalion."

A husky, whimpering little sound made him look down. A native child or pollywog as the Terrans called them was clinging desperately to the teacher's skirt. His tiny webbed feet clutched at the cloth as he buried his face against her leg. From behind her peered still another child, its baby frog face working spasmodically in the beginnings of a sob. Six or seven others were lying flat on the floor their bodies trembling in terror.

Terrence took another look outside and what he saw sent him into another stream of cursing. The Narakan Rifles were hurrying to the scene of action. Down the middle of the street they came in a column of fours with their drums and bugles blaring out a poor imitation of *The Wearing of the Green*. Their standard bearer was running at the head of the column beside Sergeant Major O'Shaughnessy.

"Oh, my God! He wouldn't . . . !"

"Lieutenant, please!"

"Teacher, will you shut up!" he roared as he leaped across the room toward the front door. At the harsh tone of his voice, the whimpering sounds in the room suddenly burst forth in full volume as the ten pollywogs raised their hoarse voices into full throated croaks.

Terrence braced his body against the wall and held his gun ready as he pulled open the door. In parade formation his men were moving up the street and in a moment they would be away from the buildings' protection and directly in the Rumi line of fire.

"O'Shaughnessy, you idiot!" he roared above the croaking from behind him and the rattle of firing outside.

O'Shaughnessy came to a skidding halt almost directly in front of the schoolhouse but his men kept on going, their faces set and determined. O'Shaughnessy came to attention and snapped a salute.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lieutenant."

"Halt! Damn it, HALT!" Terrence yelled at the column of greenbacks. Their formation crumbled as they ran into each other, stopped on each other's feet and pushed and shoved. But they halted.

"O'Shaughnessy! Break ranks. . . take cover. . . line of skirmishers!" Terrence shouted and hid the dart behind a sandbox in the schoolyard as the Rumi continued firing. There was a mad scramble among the Narakans as they scattered behind walls and into buildings, moving with an incredibly rapid jerping motion which they used when in a hurry.

Terrence was so glad to see only one sprawled figure in the dust of the street that he just lay there for a few seconds spitting dust before he realized that he had forgotten to close the face vicer of his radiation clothing.

THERE was a slight clacking sound from beside him and when he turned he found O'Shaughnessy lying almost beside him, squinting along his carbine. The Narakan's face split into two replicas of the map of Ireland and he saluted the handed, his webbed fingers at just the proper angle.

"O'Shaughnessy, you don't have to salute when you're lying down!" O'Mara tried to keep his voice as calm as possible.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lieutenant. Pretty quick we fight now!"

His lieutenant ignored him and searched for signs of life in the houses across the square. There wasn't a Rumi in sight except for one on the roof of a shed next to the burning warehouse. He tried a couple of shots with his automatic and missed. He grabbed O'Shaughnessy's carbine and dropped the creature as it tried to scramble off the shed.

"Pretty soon we fight with bayonets!" O'Shaughnessy asked as Terrence handed back the carbine.

"O'Shaughnessy, why do you do things like this to me, me who took you out of your damn mud hole and made a soldier out of you?"

O'Shaughnessy's mouth formed a huge round moon. "Not understand, Lieutenant. . . ." he began but he was ignored again as Terrence stared across the street in pained disbelief to where the heavy weapons squad of the Narakan Rifles was gathered in a huddled group behind a native house, struggling to set up their Banning Automatic Blaster and two machine guns. One of the men was down on his hands and

knees balancing the heavy barrel of the blaster on his back while two others were attempting to push the ponderous bench onto it by main strength. The two machine guns were half on and half off their tripods. The leg of one of them had been bent in the wrong direction and the other was so covered with grease that the parts wouldn't fit together.

"Oh, Lord!" moaned Terrence and was bracing himself for a dash across the street when a figure in Terran battle armor came around the building on the run, dodging and crawling as spring bolts missed the dust in front of him. It was the short, stout Gunnery Sergeant, Polasky. Terrence breathed a sigh of relief.

He turned to O'Shaughnessy. "Now, Sergeant, this is our problem. Those buildings over there are filled with Rumi. They have automatic weapons . . . spring guns . . . firing a clip of twenty plastic bolts. They're deadly at close to medium range. They can penetrate our battle armor." He looked at the thick, knobby skin of the Narakan. "Yours too. Now, they are probably just a patrol about the size of one of our companies. They don't seem to have any heavy weapons and ours will be in action in a few minutes. Then, O'Shaughnessy. . . ." The Narakan was squinting along the barrel of his rifle.

"Are you paying attention, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir! Attention, yes, sir." O'Shaughnessy started to lift his bulky three hundred pounds up off the ground. Terrence heaved with all his might against those thick khaki clad legs to knock him down again.

"Man, what are you doing?" he yelled.

"Attention, sir, Sir said . . ."

"No, no, O'Shaughnessy. I meant, listen to me. O'Shaughnessy, how could you? Haven't I been like a brother to you? Didn't I share my whiskey and candy ration with you?"

"Yes, sir. That's why . . ."

"Then for the sake of your two headed frog-faced gods, shut up and listen to me."

Yes, sir.

"Look in a minute our Banning will be in action," his voice was drowned out by the scream of tortured air as the Banning cut loose. "Now there is a sweet sound. What do we do next, O'Shaughnessy?"

One of the row of buildings across the square glowed red briefly as the beam from the blaster caught it, glowed red and then burst into a ball of fire. O'Shaughnessy's mouth was open wide, his chinless face resting on the edge of the sandbox and his little black bead eyes were as large as they could get.

"What do we do now, O'Shaughnessy . . . come on . . ."

The Narakas made a thrusting gesture with his carbine, "Bayonet . . . we go in with bayonet now," he said.

O'Mara slapped him on the seat of his khaki pants, "No, no. You got to get this stuff straight."

The whistle of the Banning interrupted him again and it was joined by the chatter of machine guns and rifle fire and answered by the rapid clacking of spring guns. Bolts dug into the wall of the schoolhouse and showered them with plaster. Others shattered the front window. Terrence wiped plaster off his visor and tried again. "You've got to get this straight, O'Shaughnessy, because . . . well, because you may be getting an independent command pretty soon and there won't be anyone around to tell you what to do."

The Narakas was listening to him but wide-mouthed and uncomprehending. "We're going to burn them out of those huts; burn them out or burn the houses down over their heads. About the time Pelasey gets to the third one, those guys are going to break and then they'll either rush us or . . ."

Norton was yelling something from the Residency. There was a noise of clanking armor behind him and he could hear Fielding's voice cracking out orders as he came up with twenty hastily armed and armored clerks, cooks and radiomen from the HQ unit.

"O'Mara! O'Mara, they're breaking! They're running! Let's go!" Norton was on the porch of the Residency pouring Tommy gun slugs at the rear of the burning row of houses.

"Okay, let's go," Terrence said, lurching to his feet. The Narakas sergeant blew his whistle and the riflemen swarmed out from their shelters and started at a run across the square with Norton, Terrence and

O'Shaughnessy at their head. The rest of the Terrans in full battle armor lumbered along after them.

One or two bolts whistled overhead and Corporal O'Brien dropped his rifle and fell forward clutching his leg. The smoke from the burning buildings obscured their vision but Terrence had a momentary sight of Rumi radiation clothing and emptied his clip at it.

Someone from behind threw a grenade which fell short of its target and rolled in front of them. Norton took two quick strides and kicked it into one of the flaming buildings.

III

THERE were about twenty Rumi, less than they had thought, fleeing across the open fields behind the burning huts. They were firing as they ran and giving out those queer yelping cries of theirs. Three or four of them fell and then Norton was shouting, calling back his men to organize fire fighting parties.

"Captain! Captain, let's go after those guys. We can cut them off before they get to the grasslands," Terrence yelled.

"Get your men after these fires, O'Mara. We can't let them spread."

There was nothing to do but obey but he delayed long enough to empty his automatic in the general direction of the fleeing Rumi. Then he turned and yelled, "Harrigan! Sergeant Harrigan! Where in the devil is that . . ." There was a clashing sound behind him and Harrigan stumbled through the smoke and came down on his foot, all three hundred pounds of him.

Later, as the last smoking embers of the fire were being smothered by industrious squads of Narakas with buckets and shovels, Terrence limped back across the square with Bill Fielding.

"We should have gone after those lowly scum!" Bill said, "They may cut back around the town again and give the battalion some trouble on the river road."

"Don't you think I know it! As fast as the Greenbacks can move when they want to, we could have caught the lot of them before they got into the grasslands. But Norton was worried about the fires! Of

course, we're going to burn all these buildings tomorrow at the next day but Norton was afraid the Residency would catch fire."

"Probably didn't want his sweetie's fancy clothes to burn."

"They got Wilson, you know."

"Good Lord! Dead?"

"Right between the eyes. They almost got all four of us."

Fielding took his heavy battle helmet off and pushed back the glass visor of his radiation helmet to wipe the perspiration and dirt off his face. "Well, maybe Norton didn't want us to catch those damn cats. Maybe he figured he owed them that much."

O'Mara shielded his eyes as he said, "Beta's setting. It'll be night in a couple of hours and we can walk around without this blasted radiation armor for a while."

"Yeah, and we can start looking for a full scale night attack as soon as good old Alpha hides his heavy head."

"If you see O'Shaughnessy, tell him I want to see him, will you? I'm going to stop at the schoolhouse for a few minutes."

Surprise spread across Bill's freckled face. "Not the school teacher? Not you! Buddy, you've been in Dust Bin too long. You've been on Naraka too long. You'll be attending services at the Chapel next."

Terrence muttered a few old Anglo-Saxon words under his breath and limped off in the direction of the school building.

THE Reverend Amen Goodman was the smallest Narakan that Terrence had ever seen. The Johnathan missionary from Little Texas was somewhat under two hundred and fifty pounds which was slight for a Greenback. He also spoke the best English except for some of the big shots in New Chicago. Ordinarily he was a composite of superstitious reverence and natural dignity which Terrence had always found admirable. Today, however, he couldn't have appeared more ludicrous if he had tried. He was dressed for a visit to the Residency in a white duck suit which was too small and out of which he bulged in a number of surprising places.

He and Joan Allen were talking half in English and half in Narakan as the lieutenant entered. The minister had a painfully surprised look on his round green face.

"I hope we didn't bust up your school too much, Miss Allen."

"If you are quite finished with your shooting and casing, Lieutenant O'Mara, perhaps you have time to explain to Rev. Goodman and me what this talk about evacuation means."

As she spoke, she brushed stray strands of black hair up under her radiation helmet. For the first time in the six months that she had been in charge of the orphan school in Dust Bin, Terrence decided that maybe she was pretty after all. He wasn't sure whether it was the high color which excitement lent to her usually pale face or if Bill Fielding was right in saying he had been on Naraka too long, but Joan Allen was beginning to look good to him. At the moment the feeling wasn't as all mutual.

"Is it true that the Defense Force is pulling out and leaving the rest of us to the Rumi?"

Terrence took off his helmet and let the rapidly cooling air strike his head. "Not exactly, teacher," he said. "The Fifth is pulling out but so are all the Terrans in Dust Bin. Everyone's being ordered back to Little Texas. That's why the Saw Aloud is standing by."

"All the Terrans, Lieutenant? What about the people here who depend on us? What about my children?"

O'Mara somehow couldn't quite look either of them in the face. He muttered something about having to get back to his command post and started out the door. Joan called after him as she noticed his limp. "Lieutenant, I'm sorry, I didn't know you have been wounded."

"Oh, it's nothing . . . nothing," he said, hurrying away, his neck reddening from something more than the attention of Beta Centauri. How in the name of Naraka's sixty devils could you tell a woman that one of your own non-coms had stepped on your foot and nearly broken your instep?

The battalion straggled into Dust Bin during the night. It hadn't exactly fought its way back from the river but had had enough casualties to make the men nervous and jumpy without tempering them at all. One of the casualties had been Lt. Colonel Upson. Now Major Chapelle was in command. The men of the battalion were

nervous but Chapelle was riding on the thin edge of panic. He ordered everyone on board the *Saw Maid* at once and then countermanded the order and formed a defense perimeter around the town. He threw out patrols which were unable to contact any Rumi on the Dust Bin side of the river.

The next morning Terrence was summoned to Government House for an officers' conference. As he hurried along its single street, Dust Bin was in a state of confused and helpless excitement. The three or four hundred Narakans who made up its population were all in the street or square. Many of them were carrying their belongings on their shoulders and looked as if they were only waiting for an order of some kind to send them scurrying off toward the Sani swamps.

As O'Mara reached the veranda of the Residence, Rev. Goodman was speaking with Joan Allen by his side. His words were aimed at Chapelle, Norton and a large gray-eyed man whom Terrence recognized as the Captain of the *Saw Maid*.

"When you came, you earthmen in your great ships, the Narkian was a hunted creature on his own planet and had been back as far as he could remember. You drove off the Rumi and took parts of the planet for your own use but you did not hurt the Narkian. You brought him out of his swamps and taught him much; to wear clothes, to till the ground and many other things. You even gave him your religion. But now the Rumi have returned and you say you are not strong enough to hold all the planet."

MAJOR CHAPELLE was impatient. "That's right, Reverend, there's too many of them. The garrison just isn't big enough to hold everything and it's too far back to Earth for us to expect any reinforcements for a year or even longer."

Norton took over. "You're an educated . . . ah . . . man, Goodman. You see what the problem is. We can't hold everything so we've got to cut our losses. All of the most important resources and towns are in the Little Texas area and so we're pulling back into there."

"I see. Yes, I understand. The people of

Dust Bin are part of the losses that must be cut."

"Now, now. Don't put it that way, Reverend. The natives can always take refuge in the swamps, you know."

"Yes, I suppose it must be so. Back to Little Texas for the Terrans and back to the swamps for the Narakans. Back to living naked in the mud, back to fishing for our food and back to thinking only of the next meal."

"It really isn't that bad," Chapelle said. "As soon as the situation adjusts itself, the Terran forces will be coming back. Then you can come out of your hiding places and resume your regular life again."

"Yes. And in the meantime our only problem will be to stay out of the way of the Rumi."

"I don't believe that they will go out of their way to harm you. It's the Terrans they want to drive out."

Suddenly the Reverend Goodman was shaking his fist in the Major's face, forgetting in his excitement both his manners and his correct English. "Not hurt! Not hurt, Mr. General! No, they not hurt, they just eat! They favorite food is Narka steak."

"Now, now, calm yourself," Norton put a hand on Goodman's shoulder. "There's plenty of room in the *Saw Maid* for you and the rest of your people will be safe enough in the swamps."

"What about my children?" demanded Joan Allen.

"Children, Miss Allen? I don't know. . . . Oh, yes, you mean the poly . . . the children. Why, I assume they will go with their parents."

Joan placed a small fist firmly on each of her slim hips. "Major, all the children in the mission school are orphans. They have no parents. None of them have ever lived in the swamps."

"Ah yes. But I hardly see what we can do about it, Miss Allen."

"Well, Major, I'm going to tell you what I'm going to do about it. Unless those kids are loaded on the *Saw Maid* in place of some of this junk," she waved a hand at the piles of luggage which belonged to Mrs. Wilson, "I'm going to stay with my charges and leave you with the problem of explain-

ing to the Mission Board and to the Bishop of New Chicago just why you left me behind."

At the mention of the extremely influential Johnathan Bishop the Major looked more worried than ever. After a short conference with Norton, he turned to Joan.

"Very well, Miss Allen. The children will go in the airship. I'm sure that Mrs. Wilson will be only too glad to leave some of her clothes to make room for them."

"Thank you, Major," Joan said, making no attempt to gloat over her victory.

"Now, Captain, I understand that most of the military stores have been destroyed and that the men are ready for embarkation," Chapelle went on hurriedly, addressing himself to the captain of the *Sea Maid*. "We will have about three hundred and twenty, no . . . about three hundred and thirty passengers for you."

The captain shook his head doubtfully. "It's a big load. I hope we can make it without any trouble."

"Well, then," Chapelle went on, "We'll go aboard during the day after we complete the destruction of the stores and facilities. The native troops under Lieutenant O'Shanghnessy will cover our embarkation and then convey the civilians as far as the Sasi swamps. Afterwards they will march overland to Fort Craven on the Little Texas border."

Terrence had never had any urge to be a hero. He had always pictured himself retiring at a ripe old age as a Colonel or Brigadier and raising casual oranges on Mars, but suddenly the memory of the Narskan Rifles rushing down the street with bugles blaring and flag waving right into the Ruml line of fire rose before him. The thought of O'Shanghnessy, even with his new lieutenant's commission, leading the blundering troops along the two hundred miles to Fort Craven was too much for him.

"I beg your pardon, Major," he heard himself saying. "But as the Narskan Training Officer, I think that I should remain in command of the unit in its overland march."

The Major was dumfounded. Norton looked as if he were sure the Narskan climate had proven too much of a strain for the lieutenant.

"Lieutenant O'Mara, are you sure," began Chapelle.

"Are you sure, O'Mara? Do you know what you're asking for?" demanded Norton.

"Yes, sir. I feel that since Colonel Upton appointed me Training Officer for the Narskan Rifles, it is my duty to stay with them until I am relieved."

Chapelle's look of astonishment had changed to one of relief. It would be far easier to explain the hurried abandonment of the Narskan Rifles to the native representatives at New Chicago if a Terran officer were to remain with them.

"Well," he said, "I could, of course, relieve you of your responsibility but if you feel that . . ."

"I do, sir," Terrence said quickly lest he be tempted to back out.

IV

LATER in the day as he sat in the shade of the command post's overhanging roof with his back against a stack of sandbags, he cursed himself for sixteen kinds of an idiot as he watched the evacuation begin. Beta was dropping low over the pink Meldo hills as the long line of earthmen filed up the gangway into the big airship.

"Hello," said a voice behind him. He turned to find Joan Allen standing there clothed in seduction armor and holding a small canvas bag in one hand. "I thought . . . I mean . . . I came to say good-bye."

"Hello, yourself, I thought you were on board with the rest of them." He got up hastily.

"No. I got the kids on board but I wanted one more look at the schoolhouse before we shoved off."

Somehow he was holding onto her arm, "I guess it meant a lot to you, that schoolhouse," he said.

"Yes, it did, I . . . I was afraid that I wouldn't get to see you when you got to New Chicago."

"There's no danger of that, Joanie. If and when I get there, I'll be looking for you . . . that is . . . if you want to see me."

"If you think you can stand an old maid school teacher, I'll be looking for you." She was very close to him now. "Why did you do it, Terrence? Why are you making

the march with the Narakans? Fielding says your chances aren't very good."

"I'll thank Fielding to keep his big mouth shut! I don't really know why, probably kind of an Earthenman's Burden, softness oblige . . . you know . . . something like the sort of thing Kipling used to write about."

"Hell," she said, surprising him with her vehemence, "You don't believe that guy any more than I do. It was old when Kipling wrote it and it's even older now. I think that somewhere under that tough Irish skin of yours, there's a sentimental fool hiding."

She was still closer now with her hands pressed lightly against his chest and suddenly his arms went around her, he lifted her protective visor and forced his lips down hard on hers. All of her primness had disappeared as she leaned against him, returning his kiss with a burning eagerness which a more experienced woman might have controlled.

There were tears running down his cheeks and he knew they weren't his. He released her slightly and looked down into her tear streaked face, wondering how it was possible for them to have been at the same post for six months without really knowing each other.

"I guess I'm kind of crazy about you, teacher," he said.

He had lifted her off her feet and she clung there with her arms around his neck. "Terrence, I can't leave you . . . I . . ."

As Terrence bent over to kiss her again there was a loud cough and Bill Fielding was standing there dressed in full battle armor. He grinned and said, "Much as I hate to break this up, I don't think Chapelle is going to hold the Saw Maid much longer."

Terrence set Joan gently on her feet and she turned and fled toward the waiting ship. He watched until she was on board and then turned to stare at Bill. Still grinning broadly, Bill clapped him on the shoulder as he said, "I could never have faced those bartenders on Dobi Street if I had gone back without you. We better get going, hadn't we? Sergeant Pulasky's down with the men. He couldn't bear to leave his Bannings."

"Well, I'll be damned!" was all O'Mara could find to say as he watched the big ship lift itself in the fading light, circle and pass through the smoke of Dust Bin for the last time.

THROWING their gear over their shoulders, the two officers crossed the parade ground to where the two hundred khaki clad figures of the Narkan Rifles stood waiting with Sergeant Pulasky chucking slightly as he fussed over his Bannings.

O'Shaughnessy was wearing his new lieutenant's bars and a pith helmet and was carrying a large pine of wood in imitation of Norton's swagger stick. Terrence took one look at him and at the two orderlies who stood behind him holding his field kit. He strode toward him scowling, placed his fists on his hips and stood glaring up at the Greenback as he roared, "So! It's delicious of grandeur you've got, is it? Where are Hannigan and O'Toole and their patrols? Why aren't they back?"

O'Shaughnessy stiffened to attention trying to pull in his great stomach. "They are back, Mr. Lieutenant Sir. . . I forget. They had nothing to report . . . no contact."

Terrence looked him up and down, "If you fool up just once more . . . I'm going to . . . I'll split your gizzard, stuff it with To-To leaves and send you to the Buni for their breakfast with my compliments!"

O'Shaughnessy shivered at the dire threat as O'Mara turned to Rev. Goodman who stood with his people clustered about him. "All right, Reverend, you can move out with your flock. I'll throw patrols out in front of you and bring up the rear with the rest of the Rifles. We'll see you as far as the edge of the swamps."

In a long straggly line, the refugees started out with the native police keeping order and Goodman marching at their head. The two drums and the three bugles of the Narkan Rifles struck up a badly mangled version of *Back to Dongol*, and the column followed on the heels of the civilians. Once or twice Terrence glanced back at the smoke and flame that had been Dust Bin before he turned his face forward across the miles of grasslands to where the Sui swamps lay.

Darkness had fallen but progress wasn't

difficult until one of those sudden, lashing storms for which Nankana was famous heeled itself upon them, flattening the tall grass, raising swirls of dust and finally turning the dust into thick, clinging mud.

As suddenly as it had come, the storm was gone. But by that time they were in the swamp itself. Night in the Sasi swamps. Swamps composed of a sticky, gray mud and heavy tangled undergrowth. The night was as black as the day had been bright. The column which had left the civilians at the edge of the swamp was pushing slowly forward. The Nankans glided along on their bare, webbed feet and the Terrans pushed along on snowshoe-like glides attached to their boots.

Bill Fielding, backheaded with his helmet thrown back over his shoulder, floundered along beside Terrence. "Did you ever see a place like this? Did you ever see mud like this? Even the Irish bogs couldn't be this bad."

Terrence checked his map, shielding his flashlight carefully. "We'll be out of the worst of this by tomorrow morning," he said.

"If we live until tomorrow morning," Fielding replied. "Those Rumi have eyes like the blasted jungle cats they're descended from."

"I don't think we have much to worry about until we get out of the swamps. I doubt if their patrols would penetrate very deeply into this mass."

"How about the radio? Has Polasky been able to get through to Fort Craven?" asked Fielding.

O'Mara shook his head. "No. You know what Beta's radiations do to radio reception this time of year. Even at night it takes a powerful transmitter to reach farther than twenty or thirty miles."

Later in the night, with a good ten miles of swamp country between him and the enemy, Terrence called a halt on a slightly raised spot of almost dry ground. The unwearied Greenbacks and the exhausted Terrans dropped down in huddled groups. The patrols that had penetrated to the edge of the swamp came in to report that they had contacted no Rumi ahead. Terrence munching a can of cold beans and fell over in an exhausted sleep to the sound of

O'Shaughnessy placing sentries about the camp.

THE next day's march was a nightmare to the lieutenant. If anything, the heat and humidity were worse in the swamps than they had been in Dust Bin and the going got tougher every mile. The mud was softer and the undergrowth had to be cut away by bayonet-wielding Nankans before the main body could move through. Terrence had thrown off his battle armor and lost his radiation helmet somewhere in the morass as had other of the Earthmen. Hannigan had prepared a thick mass of mud and grass which the Terrans applied to exposed parts of their bodies.

Later in the afternoon of the second day the Nankan Rifles came to a tepid little stream that marked the end of the swamps, and for the first time Terrence ordered a rest of longer than two hours. Bill Fielding was lying flat on his back in the grass beside the stream with his feet dangling in the water, shoes and all, when O'Mara dragged himself wearily back from inspecting the pickets and stopped down beside him.

"If I never to my dying day see another speck of mud," Fielding muttered as he ate a bar of tropical chocolate that was as mud covered as he was, "I'll still have seen more than all the Fieldings for two hundred years back have seen on Earth and Mars."

"And now," said Terrence as he eased over on his back with a heavy sigh, "that we have run out of mud, we can start looking for Rumi."

"At least it'll be a change! Here Kitty! Here kitty! Nice Rumi! Come and get a bayonet in . . ."

Click, click, click. The sound of spring guns broke the stillness of the afternoon and was followed by the sound of rifles and a cry of pain.

"Oh, Lord!" moaned O'Mara, "now it starts!" He was on his feet, gripping his carbine and running bent over. Fielding was at his heels, dragging a machine gun off the ground.

"O'Shaughnessy! Hannigan! Take the first platoon. Move up to support the pickets. O'Took! On the double! Take your

squad and try to get around the firing. Bill, you and Polasky stand by here with the rest of the men and the Bannings."

Terrence had plunged into the stream and splashed across and was clambering up the opposite bank when one of his pickets came crawling and stumbling back clutching a wounded arm, "Mr. Lieutenant! Mr. Lieutenant! Rumi! Rumi! Many Rumi up ahead! Sullivan and O'Leary dead! Rumi get!"

"Medic! Medic!" O'Shaughnessy was yelling in his ear with the full-throated croak of an adult Narakan, drowning out what the wounded picket was trying to say.

"How many? How many Rumi, man?" Terrence demanded.

"Twenty . . . thirty . . . maybe thousand!" the Narakan gasped as the Medic led him off.

"Twenty, thirty, maybe thousand. That gives us a damn fine idea of what we're up against!"

While his men dragged their big bodies up the bank of the stream, O'Mara stood scowling at the right foot high grass. Usually about a foot high, the hardy and ubiquitous purple grass of Naraka grew far more lushly around the edges of the swamps. He felt that it would be a risky business at best to plunge into it after an unknown number of enemy. At the same time he had an illogical determination not to leave the bodies of his men in the hands of the Rumi. He looked at the broad, big-mouthed exaggerations of Irish faces around him, heard a sigh that came from deep in his chest and ordered, "All right, men. Spread out. Keep low and keep your eyes open. And try not to shoot each other."

"We fix bayonets now, Lieutenant, sir?" Hannigan asked.

"You keep your eyes open, Sergeant," Terrence snapped. "I'll tell you when to fix bayonets."

The noisy rustling of his men's heavy bodies as they pushed through the grass made him nervous and irritable. Then suddenly, just as they were edging their way around a gully, a dozen Rumi were swarming down on them. Terrence cut down two with his carbine but his men were firing and running as the incredibly fast catmen hurtled at them. He had a brief glimpse of O'Shaughnessy spraying submachine gun

shots wildly about and then there was a hail of spring bolts and two of his men were down. The whole platoon was thrashing through the grass in their direction and the Rumi were gone as quickly as they had come.

"Come on!" Terrence shouted, breaking into a run with twenty or thirty Riflemen after him. A bolt grazed his cheek and another cut down a man to his right. He emptied his carbine in the general direction of the Clack, Clack, Clack. Hannigan was roaring a primitive bull-throated chant and firing at everything that moved. O'Shaughnessy managed to jam his gun and was beating frantically at it with one webbed fist. They burst into a clearing filled with Rumi and both sides blazed away at point blank range. It was hard for even a Narakan to miss at that close range and the Rumi broke and ran just as Sergeant O'Toole and his squad came out of the grass on the other side of the clearing.

The Rumi, trapped, turned and dashed at Terrence and his men. The lieutenant drove his fist into one cat faced creature and smashed his empty gun across the head of another. Hannigan grappled with one of the lithe gray-bodied things and slowly crushed it beneath his 350 odd pounds. O'Shaughnessy beat another insensible with his jammed Tommy gun. Several Narakans were down but most of them had taken Rumi with them.

Terrence was knocked off his feet by a gray ball of fury that leaped at him wielding a stiletto-thin knife. He caught at the Rumi's arm with both hands but the creature was not only fast but strong. It twisted out of his grasp and slashed at him and only a quick sideward roll saved him. Desperately he brought his fist down on his assailant's head.

The Rumi's grip relaxed slightly and Terrence drove his fist full into its face and locked his legs about its waist. The catman couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and fifty pounds but all of it was wiry strength. It clawed at him now, ripping his protective clothing and gashing his legs, meanwhile trying to get its knife into play. He was vaguely conscious that his men had disposed of the rest of the Rumi and were dancing around him frantically trying to

got a chance to aid him. He was struck by the incongruity of a civilized being descended from simian ancestors and a civilized being descended from feline ancestors fighting fang and claw while a bunch of misplaced amphibians danced about them.

Making his weight count he suddenly twisted and bucked the Rumi under him but something hit him a terrific blow on the back of the head and blackness closed in.

V

O'MARA awoke with a head that felt like all the bangwrens of a misport life.

"Have a nice rest?" Bill Fielding asked.

Terrence reached a weak hand to the back of his head and felt bandages. "Did I catch a spring bolt?" he asked.

Bill grinned. "Well, no. Not exactly. It was more on the order of Private O'Hara's rifle butt. He was trying to hit the Rumi you were necking with."

"I might have known," Terrence growled.

"We lost six men but recovered all the bodies except for one. We've got four wounded . . . litter cases. Thought you were going to make it five for a while."

"Well, they won't slow us down too much. We still have about a hundred and fifty miles to go. We'll camp here for the night and move out at dawn."

Marching in the early morning and resting in the heat of the day before another afternoon march, the Narskan Rifles covered another fifty miles of the distance to Fort Craven without incident but not without signs of Rumi. Twice they came on recently occupied camps and once they caught sight of a Rumi patrol moving parallel to their own line of march.

The next morning, which was blistering and cloudless, they were only seventy miles from the Fort.

"Maybe we ought to give the radio another try," Terrence decided. "We're close enough to have a chance of getting through now."

Polasky set up the field radio.

"Hello, Balliwick. Hello, Balliwick. This is Apple Three Three. Can you read me? Come in, please."

O'Mara and Fielding sat and listened while he repeated the call a dozen or more

times. His only answer was the heavy static that Beta produced in most electronic instruments. The same static that made radar and space scanners all but useless, that limited aircraft to the big dirigibles and weapons to old fashioned rifles and machine guns.

"I guess we'll know what's going on when we get there!" Terrence said. He wiped his forehead with his arm, noticing that the heavily caked mud was beginning to crack off. He would be in for a bad case of sun poisoning probably.

A rare breeze had sprung up and drifting down it from the west came the sound of gunfire. As one man, everyone in the camp stiffened.

"Did you hear that?" demanded Fielding.

"I think I hear a Banning," Polasky said.

"Sounds like it's coming from in back of us . . . off to the west."

"From what our scouts have been able to pick up, that's the general direction that the Rumi have been moving," Terrence said.

"But there's nothing over that way. What in hell could they be attacking?" Fielding was on his feet, looking off in the direction from which the sounds were coming.

Terrence was aware of an increasingly uneasy feeling. He got to his feet and picked up his gear. "The sounds could be deceiving. We might as well get moving. It isn't going to get much cooler before nightfall."

AN HOUR later they were hotly engaged with a large force of Rumi. Rumi armed for the first time with heavier weapons, mortar-like guns that hurled pods of smothering dust that caused almost instant strangulation. Rumi who attacked suddenly, giving them time only to drop to the ground and set up the Bannings and machine guns before three hundred howling floods came charging through the grass at a dead run, firing as they came.

O'Mara was behind a machine gun and Fielding and Polasky each had a Banning in action. They met the Rumi charge with a withering hail of lead and fire. The Narskans lying as flat as their huge chests would allow them were firing as fast as the automatic rifles would fire. The Bannings swept the line of charging figures. As the beams paused for a moment, the charge would take effect and a ball of fire would mushroom



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skyward, leaving a dozen scared cat bodies on the ground. Terrence swept his machine gun along in a swath behind the Bannings, picking off what they left. Some dozen women made it to within ten yards of their front but sprawled still or lay looking briefly until a Greenback put another bullet into him.

The Rumi were gone, withdrawing to the west and Terrence was yelling and cussing at his men to keep them from breaking ranks and following them. Three Riflemen and O'Toole were dead and Sergeant Polusky was coughing out his life beside his Banning with a spring gun bolt in his stomach.

"Those damn cats!" he was muttering when O'Mara cracked him, "Those damn cats. We showed 'em, didn't we, Lieutenant? That Banning's a good gun if you . . ."

They buried the Greenbacks in eight foot graves and the Earthman in a seven foot one. "Those dirty, lousy, skinking . . ." Bill Fielding was beating his fist into the palm of his hand. "We got one of them alive this time, Terrence. Hannigan knows a little of their lingo. His old man escaped from one of their breeding pens on the other side of the Muddy. He's working him over."

In the twenty odd years that Terrence and Rumi had occupied different halves of the same planet, the number of men who had learned the Rumi language wouldn't have filled a small room. So Terrence was surprised at Bill's information and hurried toward the place where the interrogation was taking place. Before he got there, he heard a piercing cat cry which ended in a gurgle and when he reached the group of Greenbacks, Hannigan was wiping his bayonet on the grass. He stood looking down at a Rumi officer whose throat was neatly slit from furry ear to furry ear. Then fists clenched on his hips, he confronted his men.

"I don't suppose it ever occurred to you bunch of dumbwits that we might have gotten some information out of this guy. He might have talked, you know."

"He talk," grinned Hannigan. "He talk plenty. He feared we might hurt him. We tell him no hurt if he talk. . . . He!"

"He say big flyship down, Mr. Lieuten-

ant" said O'Shaughnessy.

"What? What do you mean?" demanded O'Mara.

"Flyship . . . *Saw Maud* crash in storm. . . . Rumi find."

"Good God! The *Saw Maud*!" Terrence gasped, "That storm the first night!"

They surround and attack Terrence. These ones on way to join attack when meet us," O'Shaughnessy went on.

"He tell where ship down," Hannigan said, "It near bend in Big Muddy . . . place I know. Ten, twenty mile back."

The Greenbacks were watching the Terrans, fingering their bayonets eagerly and hugging their rifles. Terrence had the impression that they were beginning to like their jobs. He turned to Bill Fielding. "Well, Bill, it looks like we came about twenty miles too far."

Bill grinned, "Yep, I guess so. Come on, soldiers, fall in. We got work to do back here a piece."

A two hour's forced march with the sun beating down and the sound of firing growing closer. Only a column of Greenbacks could have done it and only a crazy Irishman would have asked them to. They came up over a rise and looked down a gentle slope toward the brown twisting snake that was the Big Muddy. On its banks lay the broken shape of the airship and swarming across a burned circle around it were Rumi, thousands of them. The firing had slackened in the last few minutes and now they could see why. The Rumi were assaulting and were at close grips with the ring of defending Terrans.

"Now?" questioned O'Shaughnessy, "We fix bayonets now?"

"Yes," replied Terrence, "now we fix bayonets."

At his word three hundred big clumsy hands reached for three hundred bayonets and fixed them to three hundred rifles.

"O'Shea, take O'Toole's squad and stand by up here with the Bannings. O'Shaughnessy, take the left flank. Bill, you take the right. Let's go!"

There wasn't a sound out of the Rifles as they started down the hill, none of their usual crackings and hellowings, just silence and the heavy thud of their feet. The Rumi had seen them. Many of those in the

most of the attack were swinging about to face them. Spring gun bolts began to whiz in their direction. One or two Narakans fell. They were closer to the struggle now, closer to the tightly packed Rumi and the hand to hand struggle about the *Sea Maid*.

Terrence was firing, throwing lead into the grey-bodied mass ahead of him but his men were just thundering along with their little black eyes fixed on their old oppressors, bayonets leveled in front of them in approved training school method. They resembled nothing so much as a regiment of tanks hurtling at an enemy. The momentum of their charge carried them half way through the Rumi ranks, the terrific force of the plunging amphibians bowling over the lighter catmen.

Bayonets, clubbed rifle and heavy webbed fist fought against claw, tooth and knife. There was almost no firing, almost no sound save for the cries of the Rumi and an occasional cheer from the Terrans.

Terrence emptied his Tommy gun, hurled it in the face of a Rumi and reached for his knife and automatic. A Rumi knocked him off his feet with the butt end of a spring gun but before he could do more, Hannigan stepped over his lieutenant and plunged his bayonet into the catman. The Irishman scrambled to his feet amidst the grey furry bodies, thrust his .45 into a scowling face and pulled the trigger. The face disappeared but another took its place and he fired again. A Rumi with a knife grabbed at him from behind and he raised his pistol again but the cat was already down with a bayonet between his shoulders.

The Greenbacks were yelling now, lifting those great voices of theirs in full throated bullfrog croaks. The Rumi, trapped and desperate, were scattering and trying to flee down river. O'Mara stumbled over a barricade of rocks and boats and almost got a Terran slug in him before he realized that they had cut their way through to the broken ship. He was up in a minute and urging his men on after the scattering enemy. Twenty or thirty of them tried to make a stand around a tall Rumi officer but O'Shaughnessy at the head of a wedge of Narakans swept into them at a full run.

Their bayonets dashed for a few seconds and then flashed no more, the steel was covered with blood. A few hundred Rumi made it to the river under a hail of fire from O'Shea and his squad on the hill. Hardly pausing to consider their cat-like aversion to water, most of them plunged in and struck out for the other shore. The rest were cut down on the bank by crushing Greenbacks. Terrence grabbed hold of one of his buglers and then had to practically beat the man over the head to get him to sound Recall.

Bill Fielding picked his way among the bodies and came toward Terrence holding his left arm. O'Shaughnessy was leaping up and down and waving his fist across the river.

"Things different now! All different now! One Greenback better than four, five, eight Rumi!"

"At least that many," Terrence said under his breath before he roared at O'Shaughnessy. "Fall the men in on the double now! We're going to march back to the *Sea Maid* in proper military style."

There was a blowing of sergeant's whistles, the shouting of corporals, and the Narakans Rifles slowly formed ranks. Some were missing and others were limping and holding wounds but they stepped out smartly as the column headed back up the river. Every rifle was at the correct slope, every man was in step as they marched through the makeshift barricade and past where Chapelle was standing. The drum and bugle corps struck up *The Wearing of the Green* just as O'Mara shouted, "Eyes Right!" and every eye swung right in perfect unison. A tattered and weary Chapelle brought a surprised hand up to salute and the Narakans Rifles came to a snappy halt.

A small, black haired figure threw itself at Terrence and his arms were again holding Joan Allen. "I knew you'd come," she said. "Only a big, crazy Irishman like you could do it."

He kissed her and then pressed his mud-caked face against hers as he said into her ear, "Only three hundred big, crazy Irishmen, baby. There's not a drop of anything else in me boys."

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